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EXPLORING PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT POTENTIAL AND READINESS FOR THE PRINCIPALSHIP IN ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS: A CASE STUDY

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EXPLORING PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT POTENTIAL AND READINESS FOR THE PRINCIPALSHIP IN ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS: A CASE STUDY

by

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DEDICATION

To my parents for their love, support, and sacrifices, most especially Mom for whom this is a dream realized. And to Tia Esther for raising me as her own and sharing her love for the University of Texas with me.

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Exploring Principals' Perceptions about Potential and Readiness for the Principalship in Assistant Principals: A Case Study

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Research has documented the need for school districts to recruit and retain qualified school leaders capable of navigating the organizational challenges for school improvement, particularly in high-poverty, low-achievement contexts. Recently, scholars have studied *principal pipeline* structures implemented by school districts to recruit and retain effective principals. A key finding of this research is that clearly-defined standards and performance criteria can inform school districts' strategic identification and development of individuals with the potential to become effective principals. Further research is needed to understand and define potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals, commonly the largest candidate group in a principal pipeline.

I used a qualitative case study design to investigate veteran principals' perceptions about potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals. Six principals in one urban school in Texas were purposefully selected based on their experience with supporting, developing, and/or endorsing former assistant principals for

promotion to the principalship while under their supervision. I collected data through questionnaires and in-depth interviews to understand this phenomenon through the informants' lived experience.

I found that the principals view professional competence and personal dispositions as indicators of potential and readiness for the principalship. They believe an assistant principal's potential to perform as a principal is evident in the processes and products of their work, but they don't believe all high-potentials are necessarily ready to become principals. Shared leadership was instrumental to developing readiness for the principalship in their assistant principals, and developing capacity by building on strength and targeting weakness worked equally well in their experience.

Using these findings and existing research, I identify state and district-level policy implications for the field. I also make recommendations for further study of this topic in the future.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Being a principal is a tough job. Performing effectively as a principal is even harder. I know because I served as a principal for seven years. With this understanding, my purpose and goal as a researcher with a practitioner background is to advance knowledge and understanding of policy and practice in order to positively impact the lived reality of public education stakeholders broadly and in each community.

The idea of studying principal potential and readiness emerged after reviewing the educational and business literature on leadership development and getting a sense of what constitutes the knowledge frontier in leadership, especially school leadership. The idea of purposive action to identify, develop, and place individuals strategically to ensure that every school has an effective leader makes sense to me because my experience tells me it is feasible and the opportunity exists for customizable implementation — two considerations I believe are essential for wide-scale adoption of a policy or improvement initiative.

I chose to focus on assistant principals (APs) in this study because my broader research interest in school-level leadership concerns the period between completing a principal preparation program and attaining the principalship. Generally speaking, there is much to know and understand about what happens during this period and how it influences principal leadership and effectiveness.

In the sections that follow, I provide an overview of this study beginning with the research problem this study aims to address. I then define the study's purpose, define the questions guiding this study, and provide a justification for the significance of this study.

Statement of the Problem

Research conducted on effective schools and school reform provides substantial evidence that school leadership is a key factor in student achievement and school improvement (Edmonds, 1979; Fullan, 2001; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). In 2007, speaking to the importance of principal leadership to educational reform, Papa observed:

> Over the past decades, three approaches to school reform have emerged: market-based, standards-based, and whole-school reform. Although the foundation of each approach is different, all three approaches focus on the need for strong and effective school leadership (p. 268).

Moreover, leadership is especially important to turning around chronically low performing schools (K. A. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004), because effective principals affect school capacity by hiring and developing talented teachers (Beteille, Kalogrides, Loeb, & Urban Institute, 2009). Effective principals also retain talented teachers, counteracting the detrimental impact of losing teachers to less challenging assignments in their districts (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, Wheeler, & Duke University, 2006). This research on the importance of principal leadership has consequently resulted in similar research focused on attracting and retaining highly

qualified candidates to serve in school leadership roles (Forsyth & Smith, 2002; Pounder & Crow, 2005).

Researchers who study principal recruitment have argued that there is a shortage of candidates who are both qualified for and capable of meeting contemporary demands of school leadership (Cusick, 2003; Fink & Brayman, 2006; Mendels, 2012). The shortage of qualified candidates is particularly endemic to districts and schools perceived to have challenging working conditions (Fuller & Young, 2009; Odden & Kelly, 2008; Papa, Lankford & Wyckoff, 2002; Pounder & Crow, 2005). What constitutes "challenging" is a subjective determination but Loeb, Kalogrides, and Horng (2009) found that principals generally "prefer to serve in schools with favorable working conditions which also tend to be schools with fewer poor, minority and/or low-achieving students (p.25)." These authors go on to say:

> In preliminary analyses…we find principals get considerably better at raising student achievement the longer they spend at a given school. If these patterns are detrimental to students in higher-poverty, lower-achieving schools – and it is easy to believe that they are – then the results suggest the potential benefits of policies that aim to attract and retain highly effective principals at low-performing schools. (p.31)

Because urban school districts are frequently marked by higher concentrations of poverty, greater racial and ethnic diversity, and larger concentrations of immigrant populations (Kincheloe, 2004), effective leadership recruitment is particularly important to the academic future of students attending urban schools.

Equally as important as recruiting effective principals is retaining those already in the system. Nationally, Battle (2010) found that the principal's average tenure length at each school is decreasing. In their longitudinal study of newly-hired principals in Texas, the state in which this study was conducted, Fuller and Young (2009) found that 85% of elementary principals return after the first year and less than 50% stay at the same school for five consecutive years. This means children who begin in pre-Kindergarten will have at least two, possibly three, principals by the time they complete the fifth grade. Less than 80% of new middle school principals return to the same school after one year, and slightly more than one-third are at the same school after five years. At the high school level, about 76% return after one year and fewer than 60% stay for three consecutive years, meaning that nearly one half of the students entering a Texas high school as freshman will have a different principal when they graduate.

Principal turnover matters because it has been linked to increases in teacher turnover (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2011; Fuller, Baker, & Young, 2007), which disproportionately impacts urban schools because teacher and principal effectiveness have been estimated to explain nearly 60% of annual student achievement gains (Marzano, et al., 2005). Additionally, as Fuller and Young (2009) argued, school reform is a process that can take several years of sustained effort. If the principal leaves before key reform components are institutionalized into the school's culture, the key changes and initiatives they initiated may not realize their full effect, and a succession of short-

tenured principals may cause a school to have layers of reform operating concurrently, potentially inhibiting school and student achievement.

Building on the foundation of this research on recruitment and retention, recent scholarship has begun to examine the role and influence of *principal pipelines*, pre-service structures and initiatives implemented by school districts to recruit and retain effective principals. Principal pipelines are the systems in place in local school districts to identify and develop talent (Mendels, 2012). Pijanowski, Hewitt, and Brady (2009) emphatically made the point that local districts should focus producing quality, not just quantity, in their pipelines: "simply counting the number of applicants who meet the experience and credential qualifications is not as telling as exploring how many of those applying for jobs are *ready* [emphasis added] to lead effectively" (p.87). Indeed, according to Gajda & Militello (2008), even though there is an ample supply of credentialed educators who are eligible to assume the principalship, school districts are reporting a shortage of qualified candidates capable of positively impacting student achievement and school improvement. Therefore, for a principal pipeline initiative to be successful, a key first step is accurately identifying which people have the *potential* to become effective principals (Mendels, 2012). Speaking to the challenge of identifying potential, Robinson, Fetter, Riester, and Brocco (2009) said:

> One of the most relevant yet misunderstood questions within talent management is how to successfully identify high-potential employees - people who will, when called upon, step up and actually deliver in larger roles with more responsibility. Almost every organization is faced with this dilemma, and often the only source of information to predict future

> success is past job performance. But this information is not enough to go on; in fact, it is terribly incomplete. We know that to succeed at the next level, particularly if this is not a simple expansion of one's existing role, it may take something quite different. And, of course, the cost of getting it wrong can be devastating.

Herein lies the problem this study aims to address. Because leadership for school improvement is highly contextualized (Hallinger & Heck, 2010), broad leadership standards are useful for informing decisions in the principal pipeline only to a certain extent (Mendels, 2012). It is imperative that local districts develop clear, rigorous descriptions of the selection criteria and performance expectations for assistant principals and principals. These criteria can also inform the identification, development, and selection processes of recruitment and retention. Understanding what defines high-potential employees in one school district can inform and advance the work of others engaged in similar work.

Because an aspirant's first administrative position is likely to be as an assistant principal and the most common path to becoming a principal is through service as an AP (Retelle, 2010), assistant principals are an important candidate group in any given principal pipeline. However, educational leadership research has primarily focused on principals, resulting in a relative knowledge gap in the literature on assistant principals (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2011; Kaplan & Owings, 1999). This study therefore aims to address the need to advance understanding in this area. Finally, given the particular importance of effective leadership to urban schools, it is furthermore important to explore this issue in an urban setting.

Purpose of the Study

Scholars have documented interest among policymakers and school districts to prepare qualified principals who can successfully navigate the demands of school reform (Murphy & Hallinger, 1992; Normore 2007). Recruitment and selection of effective school leaders is one of the biggest human resource challenges districts face (Newton, 2001). To address this shortage, urban school districts have increasingly implemented principal pipeline programs to identify and develop internal talent (Giber, Carter, & Goldsmith, 2000; Normore, 2007). While research has primarily focused on documenting and discussing the pervasiveness of and causes for the school leadership shortage, Kwan & Walker (2009) argued that studying the criteria used for recruitment and selection is important to understanding a vital supply consideration: principalship candidate quality. Farly-Ripple, Raffel, and Welch (2012) agreed with this assertion and called for studies beyond labor market trends that examine what explains transitions within school administrations, including assistant principal attainment of the principalship. Despite their potential as "targets of opportunity" (Barnett, et al., 2012), assistant principals are underrepresented in the educational leadership literature (Kaplan & Owings, 1999). Those who have studied assistant principals, have maintained that AP professional development and socialization, particularly at the campus level, have been generally inadequate, ineffective, or uncommon (Jayne, 1996; Koru, 1993; Mertz, 2006). To this end, Barnett, et al. (2012) argued that prioritizing assistant principal development and

socialization can benefit districts' efforts to recruit and select qualified and capable principals.

In response to the call for empirical research on the criteria that can inform the recruitment and selection of qualified and capable candidates for the principalship (Kwan & Walker, 2009), the purpose of this study was to explore principals' perceptions about potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals. Understanding these phenomena through the lived experience of practicing principals is important because their perceptions are grounded in the contextual realities of what it takes to perform successfully in the role. They also bring a unique perspective to the discussion about what reveals that an assistant principal has the skill, disposition, and mindset to perform successfully as a principal who can inform policy and practice (Farley-Ripple, et al., 2012).

Research Questions

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What counts as potential and readiness for the principalship?
2. How do principals assess or evaluate potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals?
3. How do principals develop potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are utilized throughout this study:

Efficacy: is the confidence to develop a specific ability or skill for a particular context or leader role.

High-potential: A "high-potential" individual is one who was formally identified in an organization as possessing the characteristics associated with readiness to lead effectively.

Learning goal orientation: concerns whether individuals see themselves as works in progress and believe feedback is useful to enhance or realize potential. In contrast, individuals with a *performance* goal orientation see feedback as an evaluation of task completion quality or general effectiveness, not an opportunity for continued growth or improvement.

Metacognitive ability: concerns the awareness of one's thought process during experiences, the interpretation of these experiences, and whether/how the self-construct is challenged and/or altered accordingly.

Potential: consists of the qualities to effectively perform and contribute in broader or different roles within the organization at an unspecified point in the future.

Principal developer: A "principal developer" is an educational administrator who has developed, supported, and endorsed at least two assistant principals formally under his or her supervision for promotion to the principalship.

Readiness: entails having the knowledge, ability, and proper mindset necessary for navigating immediate organizational or job-specific challenges.

Self-awareness clarity: concerns how individuals define themselves and the extent to which they engage in adaptive (or maladaptive) reflection based on their definition of self.

Self-complexity: is the banked knowledge and experience individuals possess to apply to new experiences.

Supervising principal: refers to the assigned principal at the school where an individual worked as an assistant principal.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study examined principals' perceptions about principal readiness and potential in assistant principals. It did not investigate leadership readiness in general or for any other role than the principalship. This study also did not attempt to understand principal potential and readiness in those who become principals through a path other than through service as an assistant principal. It also did not aim to understand readiness for the principalship through the perspective of any other group than principals who have developed or supported assistant principals for promotion to the principalship. Finally, the participant sample selected to inform this study was limited to practicing educational administrators in one urban school district in Texas.

The primary limitation of a qualitative research design is that the findings from this study cannot be generalized beyond the site and the sample of participants. I also acknowledge that I brought my own ideas about potential and readiness for the principalship to this study as a former principal and supervisor of principals.

Assumptions

This study assumed:

1. The construct of readiness for the principalship is part of the common lived experience of principals.
2. The respondents possessed the self-awareness to speak to their lived professional experiences.
3. The respondents possessed the capacity to describe their understandings and practices.
4. The respondents would speak honestly and candidly about their lived professional experiences.

Significance of the Study

Evidence on the indicators of leadership potential and readiness for the principalship could be useful to school districts and aspiring school leaders alike. The findings from this study aim to advance the knowledge base of school leadership and can

potentially inform the identification, development, and selection of AP candidates for the principalship.

Summary

Research conducted on effective schools and school reform has established the role of the principal as a key factor of individual and organizational achievement. Current principal career trends indicate the need to recruit and retain effective school leaders qualified for and capable of navigating the organizational challenges to school improvement, particularly in high-poverty, low-achievement contexts. Building on previous scholarship on recruitment, retention, and the principal pipeline, this study explores principals' perceptions about principal potential and readiness in order to advance understanding of the essential knowledge, skills and disposition characteristics which would allow school districts to determine which candidates have the ability, through strategic support and development, to perform successfully as a principal at some point in the future and the holistic capacity to perform successfully in the role immediately.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate principals' perceptions about potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals. Accordingly, this review of the relevant literature aims to accomplish two objectives: 1) outline how researchers have studied leadership readiness and leadership potential in order to inform the design and methodology of this study; and, 2) highlight key findings about leadership succession planning, leadership potential, leadership development, leader developmental readiness, and principal effectiveness. These areas of knowledge serve as the focus of this review because they are essential to understanding of leadership potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals.

Definition of Potential and Readiness

Potential refers to the *possibility of actualization,* meaning that to have potential is to show the capability to develop into something in the future (*OED Online*, 2011). Leadership potential, then, can be thought of as a generic assessment of an individual's ability to perform successfully as a leader at some point in the future.

In contrast to *potential,* which speaks to perceived ability for something to occur in the future, *readiness* focuses on the present and also considers motivation. To be ready means to be prepared and to be willingly disposed to do something (*OED Online*,

2011). As it pertains to leadership, therefore, readiness entails having the knowledge, ability, and proper mindset necessary for navigating immediate organizational or job-specific challenges.

While readiness and potential are distinct in literal meaning, the literature on leadership potential and leadership readiness reveals a common objective between the two areas of scholarship. Both seek to describe and identify which individuals are most likely to perform effectively in certain leadership situations, just as this study aims to do for the principalship. Therefore, both are considered equally instrumental to this end.

Empirical Studies on Leadership Potential

The studies discussed below are not an exhaustive representation of the research on leadership readiness and leadership potential. They also do not constitute the complete body of literature from which the findings on leadership development, leadership potential, leader developmental readiness, and principal effectiveness are reported. Rather, the studies selected for this discussion provide an overview of those studies which have been conducted to date in the fields of education and business, and are useful to informing the design and methodology of this study. Although this study is concerned with the development of individuals for service in a specific leadership role in education, i.e., the principalship, studies on leadership in business were included in this review because the knowledge base on leadership potential relates to the problem of recruiting and retaining effective principals as discussed in Chapter 1.

Education

In a case study on the transformation process undergone by teachers in a principal preparation program, Browne-Ferrigno (2003) explored leadership readiness through the participants' perceptions about competencies needed to lead a school. Readiness for the principalship was also assessed through participants' expressed motivation for participating in the program and their intent to pursue a promotion to the principalship. Through the analysis of participant self-reports, this study contributed to the knowledge base in educational leadership by focusing on the link between training and professional growth. It also established motivation and aspiration as key considerations of readiness for the principalship.

A study conducted by Orr and Orphanos (2010) similarly explored how principal preparation program quality impacts participants' implementation of best practice when they become principals. Data analyzed for this study consisted of self-reports from program participants about their perceived effectiveness in implementing research-based best practice as principals. A key contribution of this study is that it estimated the effect of individuals' pre-service training experiences to their practices as principals. While the authors do not refer specifically to leadership readiness or to potential in their study, their focus on the development of principalship candidate *preparedness* gets to the heart of leadership readiness for the principalship – growth in the knowledge, skills, and ways of thinking which promote the successful transition to and performance in the role.

Another study conducted by Myung, Loeb, and Horng (2011) explored the effect of *tapping*, i.e., the informal consideration and recruitment of educators by principals to become school leaders. In this study, the researchers analyzed survey and administrative data from a large school district to estimate the extent to which tapping is effective at identifying candidates with the potential to successfully meet the demands of the principalship. The researchers also compared tapping trends among current teachers, assistant principals, and principals, identifying the extent to which individuals in each role reported being encouraged to pursue the principalship by others within and outside the school. The findings of this study were analyzed within a framework of organizational promotion that included three categories: self-selection, selection based on demonstrated leadership proficiency, and selection based on characteristics not related to leadership effectiveness. One finding of particular interest from this study was that principals were effective at identifying and encouraging teachers with strong leadership potential to enter the principal pipeline.

Business

In 1994, McCall explored the concept of leadership potential as the ability to learn from experience by interviewing executives and other "experts" who, during their careers, had substantial involvement with identifying and promoting people with managerial and executive potential. A small number of employees identified as *leaders of the future* by some of the executives were also interviewed. The interviews focused on two areas:

defining the criteria the executives used when trying to identify potential and determining the characteristics which revealed an individual's ability to learn from experience. McCall found that identification processes of leadership potential should take into account three components: individual attributes and skills, context, and time. The findings of this study resulted in the development of a conceptual framework that served as the basis for further exploration of leadership potential.

In another study, Silzer and Church (2009) conducted a review of the existing literature on leadership potential to generate a comprehensive definition of the concept. The authors found that leadership potential consists of two parts: a *general* part that applies in almost all situations and a *career-specific* part that is relevant to only certain career paths; the authors also developed an integrated model of potential which will be discussed in this chapter's section on leadership potential.

In the last study of this overview, Dragoni, Tessluk, Russell, and Oh (2009) explored how individual traits and professional experience impact the extent to which potential is realized. Through quantitative analysis of data on managers who had been recruited to their leadership role, the authors investigated the measurable impact of the developmental rigor of an assignment (e.g., how much knowledge and skill growth the managers reported it provided), an individual's inclination to learn from experience, and the degree of access to development assignments on the development of job-specific competencies among the talent pool of recruited managers. The findings from this study suggest that individuals with a learning goal orientation are more likely to develop

managerial competencies if they have access to assignments in which they are exposed to challenges that vary in nature and complexity.

Summary

Studies examining educational leadership potential have teachers' and new principals' perceptions about the effectiveness of their principal preparation programs to get them ready for the demands of the job. Principal perceptions have also been studied to determine whether principals were effective at identifying teachers with strong leadership potential to enter the principalship pipeline. These studies support examining educator perceptions as a viable and valid means of collecting empirical data. Additionally, although this review of the literature is not exhaustive, these studies represent the general body of research that has been conducted on educational leadership potential. In this light, readiness - or *preparedness* - for the principalship in assistant principals remains an area of needed inquiry.

The business studies reviewed above have established the credibility of practical experience as credible expertise in an exploratory study examining the identification of leadership potential in employees. Additionally, leadership potential has been found to consist of generic and job-specific aspects, both of which are influenced by individual characteristics and professional experience. Together these findings suggest that principals who have been involved in the promotion of their assistant principals are

situated to speak to the personal and professional indicators of their potential for the principalship.

Knowledge Base in Five Key Areas

This section begins with an examination of the extant literature on leadership succession planning and principal effectiveness because this study aims to promote the end goal of having a highly-qualified and capable principal in every school, especially in those serving historically-underserved and underachieving student populations. The literature on leadership potential, development, and readiness are subsequently reviewed in respective order.

Leadership Succession Planning

Research has established that the process for identifying and selecting potential leaders must be objective and thorough (Whitaker, 2003) and that establishing assessment criteria is the foundation for effective identification and selection processes (Kwan & Walker, 2009). However, despite human resource management decisions being critical to shaping administrative careers, human resource management in school districts is not well understood (Farley-Ripple, et al., 2012). Recent scholarship in this area has focused on the concept of leadership succession, an offshoot of sustainable leadership development (Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves, 2007). *Leadership succession planning* refers to the structures and decisions made by school districts to select and place school leaders

over time and emphasizes the strategic identification, recruitment, and development of individuals with the potential to succeed as leaders (Fullan, 2005).

Developing effective leadership capacity among aspiring school leaders requires comprehensive and systemic support (Simmons, 2006). Successful school districts complement identification and recruitment efforts by providing structured professional socialization opportunities to develop their leadership capacity (Assor & Oplatka, 2003; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Professional socialization for school leaders concerns the process of developing the knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions associated with a professional role. The process begins when an individual begins his/her career in education and continues beyond his/her appointment into formal leadership roles (Daresh, 2004). In education, professional socialization for school leadership typically consists of formal training, internship experience, mentoring, and observation of leaders and leadership actions in one's environment (Normore, 2007). However, as Jayne (1996) observed, APs have commonly not received the professional development opportunities afforded to teachers and principals.

Principals can be instrumental to assistant principal development. They can provide training, create job-embedded leadership opportunities and experiences for their assistant principals, and encourage them to pursue to the principalship (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012; Garrett & McGeachie, 1999). Moreover, they can also inform our understanding of the criteria essential to making effective recruitment and retention decisions (Farley-Ripple, et al., 2012).

Principal Effectiveness

Empirical research on the principalship has commonly associated effectiveness with personal attributes. Effective principals have also been found to assume roles critical to producing achievement by strategically employing leadership and management competencies. To a much lesser extent, effective principals have been described as possessing certain ideological orientations thought to be conducive to success in certain environments, namely schools with high poverty and high minority student populations. More recently, performance outcomes have emerged as a preferred measure of principal effectiveness among policymakers.

Competencies. The most common way principal effectiveness has been discussed in the literature is through the demonstrated behaviors or skills that leaders of successful schools consistently employ (Cotton, 2003; K. A. Leithwood, et al., 2004; Marzano, et al., 2005). Communication, monitoring, evaluation, developing teachers, organizational management, building relationships, and setting direction are examples of competencies that have been consistently identified as effective practices. A key assumption of this view is not only that these competencies can be observed, but that all individuals can develop proficiency in them as well. The result of this developmental view of principal effectiveness has shaped preparation program design for aspiring school leaders and influenced professional development for practicing principals.

Roles. Researchers also have identified important roles that school leaders assume in leading or transforming effective schools. Examples commonly defined in the

literature include: instructional leader, change agent, and culture keeper (Marzano, et al., 2005). According to the role-based view, effectiveness is evidenced by a pattern of behaviors to fulfill or address a need essential to the school's performance. Thus, this view holds that effective principals do not employ competencies randomly or in isolation; rather, they employ them strategically to optimize outcomes.

Ideology. Less common in the literature is the view that effective principals possess certain beliefs essential to successful leadership, particularly in high-poverty and high-minority contexts. An example of a *social justice ideology* for school leaders was defined by Haberman and Dill (Haberman & Dill, 1999) who identified thirteen core beliefs they termed *star principals.* According to Haberman and Dill, personal beliefs comprise the mean total of understandings and experiences accumulated over a lifetime. The authors explain that ideology cannot be taught or developed, so principal candidate selection and training should focus on those who already possess the star principal ideology since they can develop competencies and role proficiency. Training those without the star principal ideology would only produce what Scott and Hart (Scott & Hart, 1979) described as *technical drifters,* not the type of leader high-poverty and high-minority schools need to inspire and empower teachers to help students succeed.

In contrast to Haberman and Dill's argument that beliefs only develop organically through life experience, *cognitive coaching* (Costa & Garmston, 2002) operates on the fundamental assumption that individuals can develop certain beliefs through a mentoring approach grounded in cognitive psychology theory. Cognitive coaching holds that beliefs

affect behavior and that a change in beliefs is necessary for a change in behavior. In essence, cognitive coaching aims to deliberately develop practitioners' belief structures and decision making ability through guided development of self-management, self-monitoring, and self-modification practices.

Outcomes. Increasingly, the definition of principal effectiveness is driven by performance outcomes. The best example of how principal effectiveness has been codified into policy is the "Race to the Top" education reform initiative. "Race to the Top" defines an *effective principal* as one whose students, overall and for each subgroup, achieve acceptable rates of student growth according to "No Child Left Behind" provisions. A *highly effective principal* is one who meets the criteria of an effective principal and whose students demonstrate at least one-and-one-half grade level of student growth in an academic year. States, local districts, or schools may define their own additional criteria as long as student growth comprises a significant part of the evaluation and includes multiple measures. Supplemental measures may include high school graduation rates and college enrollment rates, as well as evidence of providing supportive teaching and learning conditions, strong instructional leadership, and positive family and community engagement.

Leadership Potential

Identifying internal employee talent emerged as a popular business strategy in the 1950s. Large private sector companies such as AT&T and General Electric sought to

identify employees with the potential to be effective in roles a step above their current levels, roles that typically involved project management or supervision of others (Silzer & Church, 2009). Over time, *strategic talent identification* became a common practice throughout the private sector landscape: by 2003, 50% of all companies and 100% of those which ranked in the top quartile for productivity reported having a talent identification program (Hewitt, 2003).

Initially, assessment of talent was a decision solely based on the assumption that an individual's intelligence and performance in one role could predict their successful transition to another organizational role, even if the new job consisted of different duties and required a completely different skill set (Silzer & Church, 2009). Over time, however, research proved that, although intelligence is a valuable indicator of the ability to acquire technical knowledge, it is not connected with the ability to transform that knowledge into new behavior (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002). Instead, emphasis shifted to behavior as evidence of an individual's ability to learn and, thus, his/her developmental readiness for leadership. Accordingly, most organizations in the private sector no longer aim to identify the most gifted individuals for promotion (Berke, 2003). Rather, they screen for individuals with the leadership potential to be effective in various assignments in the near and long term.

An example of a model used for identifying individuals with leadership potential is the *Integrated Model of Potential* developed by Silzer and Church (2009). This model identifies seven essential components of potential (cognition, personality, learning,

motivation, leadership, performance, and knowledge/values) which they classified into three broader dimensions. The *foundational* dimension is comprised of cognition (i.e., intelligence) and personality. The authors maintained that an individual's intelligence and personality are stable and unlikely to change much over time, even with targeted intervention. Accordingly, decisions about leadership potential should place less emphasis on foundational elements. The *growth* dimension is characterized by an individual's assessed ability to learn and to be motivated, which can facilitate or hinder growth in other areas. The *career* dimension is comprised of leadership, job performance, and job knowledge, which the authors argue are early indicators for late-career capacity.

Silzer and Church further emphasized the importance of *context* to the visibility and development of the indicators of every domain. Thus, an important consideration when screening for or making decisions based on leadership potential are an individual's current and prospective organizational assignments. The authors do not argue that the contexts of the current and future assignments should be identical or even similar; instead, those making placement decisions should examine how a candidate's experience and development in one context does or does not make a good fit for the challenges of the prospective assignment. Rather than seeking candidates with the greatest generic potential to fill leadership assignments, decision makers should ask: *which candidates have the greatest potential for success in this particular assignment?*

Leadership Development

To understand leadership, one must first understand its relationship and juxtaposition to management. According to Hallinger and Snidvongs (2008), *management* emerged as a product of the Industrial Revolution and is characterized by doing things a certain way for efficiency. A leader in the management paradigm is someone who assumes a formal leadership role that in turn serves an organizational purpose. In contrast, *leadership*, according to Hallinger and Snidvongs, gained prominence in education over the past two decades as a response to the widely-held perception that failing schools need to change, and it is characterized by motivating organizational stakeholders to focus on morally-correct improvements and achievements. In the leadership paradigm, a leader can be anyone in the organization with the capacity to provide direction or guidance to groups of people through problems that cannot be predicted (Day, 2001). In sum, management is about doing things right, and leadership is about doing the right things.

Although the leadership paradigm has gained popularity and is currently emphasized in the principal preparation literature, de-emphasizing management as an important aspect of developing and selecting individuals for leadership assignments can be counterproductive. As Hallinger and Snidvongs (2008) contended, "despite the strong reaction among many educators against managerialism, we believe that strengthening management knowledge and skills is essential if leaders are to achieve the vision that they and others define for their schools" (p. 26). Accordingly, leadership development

for the principalship can be thought of as an ongoing, systemic process of building competence in the job and leadership skills that allow principalship candidates to be effective across a variety of contexts and situations.

Traits. To date, the most common way leadership has been studied is through the attributes of proven, effective leaders. *Leader traits* are integrated patterns of personal characteristics reflecting a range of individual differences that foster leadership effectiveness across a variety of group and organizational situations (Zaccaro, 2007). According to Zaccaro, however, some traits are associated with leadership *growth*, specifically *distal attributes* (e.g., cognitive abilities, motives/values, personality) which are likely to be relatively immune to most typical leader development interventions. In contrast, *proximal attributes* (e.g., social appraisal skills, expert/tacit knowledge, problem solving skills) can be altered substantially through maturation, experience, and targeted training interventions. In other words, proximal traits serve as precursors to leadership processes that, in turn, predict leadership outcomes. This is consistent with a key finding of a review of the educational leadership literature conducted by Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008). They found that a small number of personal traits explains a high proportion in the variation in leadership effectiveness among principals and that the most successful school leaders are open-minded and ready to learn from others.

Experience. Experience also plays a critical role in leadership development. LeBoef (2009) identified relevant developmental experiences as a key ingredient for effective leadership. Developmental experiences are those that challenge current

worldviews. They trigger growth because they are marked by novelty, difficulty, and conflict, requiring an individual to struggle with and internalize their meanings in the context of the known and given. Turesky and Mundhenk (2010, citing Kolb, 1984) further emphasized the importance of developmental experience to individual learning and growth, asserting that actionable knowledge results from the combination of *grasping* and *transforming* activity. In *grasping* activities, individuals participate in hands-on, concrete activities then internalize their abstract and conceptual meaning by synthesizing the experience(s) into their knowledge base. In *transforming* activities, individuals develop knowledge through observation and reflection, laying the foundation for future initiation and experimentation. Thus, the ultimate leadership outcome of developmental experience is an individual's new or enhanced ability to respond or adapt to new or unpredicted circumstances.

Developmental experiences are only part of what determines leadership development however, because experiences that provide the potential for development may not result in personal growth if those involved in these experiences are not intellectually ready or open to be influenced by what they encounter (LeBoeuf, 2009). Openness to the experience also matters. As Luthans and Avolio (2003) asserted, *trigger events* are those experiences that challenge and affect one's leadership potential, but their ultimate impact on leadership development depends on the individual's developmental readiness and proper processing of the experience. Avolio and Hannah (2008) further elaborated on this point in their description of a *leader's life story*. They contend that a

leader's life story not only defines an individual's past, it shapes their self-construct, i.e., what and how they think of themselves, thereby also influencing how they respond to their environment in the present. In effect, a leader's life story becomes the guiding narrative for a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Leadership Readiness

In their attempt to explain the interaction between one's genetic gifts and the environment that predicts who will emerge and excel as a leader, Avolio and Hannah (2009) developed the Leader Developmental Readiness (LDR) conceptual framework. LDR is the ability, orientation, and openness to develop. It consists of five components: 1) learning goal orientation, 2) efficacy, 3) self-concept clarity, 4) self-complexity, and 5) metacognitive ability.

According to Avolio and Hannah, individuals who see themselves as works in progress possess a *learning goal orientation* that's conducive to leadership because those individuals are more open to feedback. In contrast, individuals with a *performance goal orientation* are more likely to see feedback as an evaluation of task effectiveness. Because attending to and making meaning out of feedback is an opportunity for learning and growth, individuals with a learning goal orientation are more likely to realize their potential than are performance-driven individuals who focus more on the bottom-line outcome(s).

Efficacy is the confidence to develop a specific ability or skill for a particular context or leadership role. It is shaped by and can be developed through thinking and reflection, motivation, and beliefs and choices (Bandura, 1997). In effect, efficacy holds that individuals can deliberately and strategically work to realize their own leadership potential.

Self-concept clarity speaks to not just how individuals define themselves but whether – and the extent to which – they engage in adaptive and productive reflection. Individuals whose perception of self is accurate and realistic, and who use feedback as an opportunity to grow themselves productively, are more likely to realize their potential as leaders than those whose self-concept is not aligned to reality or use feedback to validate valued aspects of themselves.

Self-complexity refers to an individual's banked knowledge and experience. Richer knowledge and more varied experience provide the individual with a larger collection of tools to apply to new experiences. Leadership effectiveness, thus, is affected by the leader's degree of professional and personal complexity.

Metacognitive ability concerns the awareness of one's thought process during an experience and the interpretation of it. Individuals with the metacognitive ability necessary for effective leadership process and reflect on their experiences, challenging their conceptions of the known, given, and familiar. Figuratively speaking, metacognition is the lens through which we see and make sense of our daily lives. According to Avolio and Hannah (2009), effective leaders are not only attentive to their

environment, but they also engage in an ongoing conversation with themselves about what their experiences mean and whether they are valuable to understanding the past or have implications for the future.

Summary

Leadership succession planning refers to school district's systemic and strategic efforts to select and place school leaders over time. Key to this process is the identification, recruitment, and development of individuals with the potential to succeed as leaders. Successful school districts complement identification and recruitment efforts by providing professional socialization opportunities to develop their leadership capacity. Principals can play an important role in the professional socialization process for assistant principals as well as in research to understand the criteria than can be used for recruitment and selection decisions.

The definition of principal effectiveness has evolved over the past four decades from focusing narrowly on personal attributes to include practices, roles, ideology, and, more recently, performance outcomes. What has remained constant, however, is the idea that principal leadership is integral to personal and organizational achievement in schools.

The research on leadership potential points out that intelligence, an indicator commonly associated with contemporary research on principal quality, does not necessarily predict that potential will actualize and translate to performance.

Additionally, certain aspects of potential are associated with growth and job performance, whereas others are considered to have negligible predictive value. Finally, the extent to which an individual can realize his/her potential depends greatly on the match between his/her strengths and weaknesses and the context of the leadership assignment.

Leadership development research further explains that experience and mindset greatly impact leadership performance. In particular, experiences and thinking that allows an individual to respond or adapt to new challenges are conductive to effective leadership practice.

Similarly, leadership readiness consists of the ability, orientation and openness to develop. The central idea behind readiness is that an individual can and will be attentive to and respond appropriately in the moment to his/her environment. Moreover, s/he can and will process and reflect on experience to perform optimally in the future.

Revisiting the Literature

Substantive Implications

There is agreement in the leadership literature that readiness is characterized by specific job knowledge. Effective leaders know how to carry out essential job functions as well as manage the routine order of business. In school leadership, these are the competencies that have been well-defined by researchers who studied the practices of effective principals. It stands to reason that a candidate for the principalship deemed *ready* to handle the challenge and responsibility of leading a school would at least

possess the knowledge and skill set necessary for organizational management, instructional supervision, and school improvement.

In addition to job-specific competence, there is also consensus in the literature that certain individual traits not only describe – but can also predict – effective leadership. Cognitive processes such as problem-solving and reflection have consistently been associated with leadership effectiveness and development. Similarly, personality and social skills have been associated with effective leadership. But as Day and others remind us, the challenge of leadership extends beyond the routine and familiar. The business of school leadership evolves so principals, like leaders in other fields, must be able to adapt to new challenges in order to successfully lead and facilitate change in their schools over time. For this reason, an individual's *learning goal orientation*, or their ability and inclination to learn from experience, becomes a central attribute of leadership potential and readiness.

Research also points to experience and context as key considerations of leadership readiness. Experience matters because it contributes to one's knowledge base and world view. Holistically, quantity and quality of personal experience shapes an individual's beliefs about his/her own abilities and potential as a leader. As Avolio and Hannah argued, personal experience becomes part of his/her leadership story, which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Similarly, experience shapes a school leader's vision about what is possible in terms of organizational and student achievement; more importantly, it serves as the roadmap for realizing his/her vision. For this reason, as Silzer and Church

point out, the fit between an individual's experiential background and the leadership context for which s/he is being considered cannot only impact his/her own effectiveness, but also the success of the organization. Therefore a decision about an individual's leadership readiness for the principalship is as much a consideration about the school context as it is about the candidate's assessed development as an educational leader.

While there is substantial agreement in the literature about what constitutes and predicts leadership readiness, scholars disagree somewhat on the role and significance of current and past job performance. Those who have argued for its relevance frame performance as an issue of individual character that reveals work ethic, personal responsibility, or commitment to the organization at some level that applies and transfers to service in any organizational role. The opposing view holds that past performance in roles which require different knowledge and skills than for the new or prospective role diminishes an individual's preparation, thereby affecting their contextual fit and, consequently, their leadership readiness. Rather seeing this disagreement as a barrier to understanding leadership readiness however, it can serve as guidance for a practical solution, particularly as it pertains to screening for leadership readiness for principalship. Instead of looking narrowly at an individual's performance as a teacher or assistant principal as a predictor of their readiness for principalship, school districts could use past performance as an indicator of general potential requiring further assessment or strategic intervention. For example, candidates with assessed general potential could undergo performance assessments in which are they are asked to demonstrate their proficiency in

principal-specific knowledge and competencies. Another option, based on or independent of additional screening, is to provide these individuals with the developmental experiences to structure and spur their growth and leader developmental readiness.

Methodological Implications

This review reveals that several conceptual articles have been written on potential and leader readiness but few empirical studies have been conducted. In education, studies exploring readiness have not ventured beyond surveying individual's perceptions about the effectiveness of their administrator preparation programs and their aspirations to pursue the principalship. Thus, there is a great need for further empirical research exploring the various aspects of leader readiness in education including, and especially as it pertains to, the principalship.

Future research could explore what specific job knowledge and skills are essential to predicting readiness for the principalship as the current literature has examined principal effectiveness by defining the end-state characteristics of principals with a proven achievement track record. Additionally, studies defining and measuring the impact of the developmental experiences that promote leadership readiness for the principalship could inform internship and practicum. Researchers could also study the relevance and significance of a learning goal orientation for prospective principals, a subject underexplored in the educational leadership literature. Lastly, a more robust

notion of what leadership readiness for the principalship entails could be gained by exploring the perspectives of those familiar with identifying and developing school leaders.

Summary

Leadership readiness can be thought of as an assessment of the fit between individual capacity and situational context. An individual's disposition, experience, knowledge, and skill set factor in how s/he will lead and whether s/he is likely to succeed; however, they don't guarantee either because the circumstances and environment in which the individual is asked to lead also factor significantly. Whether someone is deemed *to have potential* or *to be ready* for leadership depends on the extent to which an individual's leadership knowledge, skill, and thinking align to the duties, responsibilities, and challenges of the task or role at hand. Hence, leadership readiness for principalship depends on the fit between the principalship candidate's realized potential and the school to which they will be assigned.

The findings of this review support that further study is needed to understand what defines leadership potential and readiness for the principalship. It also supports that assistant principals have historically not been the focus of talent development efforts in school districts nor of research on school leadership development; however, both school districts and researchers are beginning to see APs as integral to leadership succession planning.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate principals' perceptions about potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals. Exploring the relevance of leadership readiness for the principalship is important because there is a growing need for capable and qualified candidates for these positions. Therefore, the overarching aim of this study is to advance the understanding of how to identify and develop individuals with the potential to perform successfully in the principalship. Accordingly, the following questions serve as the focus of this study:

1. What counts as potential and readiness for the principalship?
2. How do principals assess or evaluate potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals?
3. How do principals develop potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals?

I begin this chapter by explaining the rationale for the methodological approach I employed to conduct this study. I then outline the design I used to answer the research questions. Next, I detail the data collection and analysis procedures I implemented to promote trustworthiness of the findings.

Approach

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research is the study of a phenomenon in a context in which researchers explore topics which have not been investigated or which need to be investigated from a new angle (Hays & Singh, 2012). A qualitative approach was the best method of inquiry for this study because I wanted to understand what readiness for the principalship means to a particular group (i.e., principals) for whom this phenomenon has meaning in their lived experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative methods allow researchers to advance knowledge and understanding through participants' experiences, perspectives, and history (Ritchie & Lewis, 2009) and emphasize the socially-constructed nature of reality, the relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational context that shapes inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Qualitative techniques allow researchers to share in the understandings and perceptions of others and to explore how individuals structure and give meaning to their lives (Creswell, 1998).

Additionally, I decided on a *qualitative approach* for this study because the genesis of this topic stems from my professional experience as a public school educator. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), choosing a research topic from personal or professional experience is not problematic. They argued that experience can be an asset to success in conducting research. Maxwell (2005), using a dissertation study case as an example, further maintained that research based on

experience can be a source of motivation to complete a project.

Role as Researcher

The role of the researcher is an important consideration in qualitative research because s/he plays a direct and intimate role in both data collection and analysis (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). As a former principal who would have met the selection criteria to serve as an informant of this study, I acknowledge that I came to this study with my own beliefs and opinions about potential and readiness for the principalship. Additionally, because I previously worked as a principal in the district in which the study was conducted, I knew some of the principals who volunteered as participants. Thus I operated as an "insider" (Merten, 1972) via my role as a researcher in this study because I was familiar with the general lived experience of the participants as well as the organization in which they worked. Corbin and Buckle (2009) described what was entailed in my unique role:

> *Insider research* refers to when researchers conduct research with populations of which they are also members so that the researcher shares an identity, language, and experiential base with the study participants. The complete membership role gives researchers a certain amount of legitimacy and/or stigma.

Hays and Singh (2012) argued that a researcher's insider understanding of a phenomenon, also referred to as *subjectivity* (Schneider, 1999), should be acknowledged in order to promote trustworthiness and can serve as means to better understand a topic. Accordingly, I acknowledge that operating as an insider may have

positively impacted my ability to recruit some of the study's informants, as well as promoted rapport and a level candor in the interviews, thus enhancing the findings. However, I realize that my own bias and familiarity with the participants also potentially limit the *truth value* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the results of this study. In the interest of transparency, therefore, I discuss in the following section the measures I undertook to reduce my bias and influence in shaping the findings.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness concerns the degree to which one can have confidence in a study's findings. Hays and Singh (2012) assert there are three interrelated components of the research process which need to be examined when judging the quality of qualitative research. The first is the research design. The second focal point of quality concerns the data analysis and interpretation. Hays and Singh argue that the description of the analytic process should contextualize the researcher's use of the theoretical perspective. Third, the authors maintain that the ultimate test of quality is in the final report and how tightly it connects the findings to the evidence it synthesizes.

Yin (2009) also described three tests applicable to exploratory case studies that judge the quality of qualitative research. The first of these tests is *construct validity*: in essence this is the researcher's burden to operationalize measures of the phenomenon or concept being studied. The second test is *external validity* which requires the researcher to contextualize a study's findings in the established body of knowledge; in other words,

the researcher must clearly articulate the contribution made to the field. *Reliability* is the third test: it requires the researcher to design a study that can be replicated under similar circumstances and yield comparable results.

With this guidance in mind, I made decisions about research design, procedures used to collect and analyze data, and methods used to interpret findings. These measures are described in the sections that follow. Lastly, to allow the reader to reflect on whether my findings are believable – as well as how they might be wrong (Maxwell, 2005) – I expressly examine my potential influence on the outcomes of this study in the discussion of the findings in Chapter 5.

Design

Case study

This study employed a *case study* research design which is a methodological approach incorporating a variety of data-gathering measures (Berg, 2001). It is both a process and a product of inquiry (Stake, 2003) and is utilized "to shed light on a phenomenon" (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003, p. 436). While a particular case cannot be used to draw conclusions for other cases, this case study was exploratory and instrumental (Stake, 2003) in that it sought to understand a unfamiliar phenomenon in order to generalize the findings beyond the boundaries of itself to theoretical propositions (Yin, 2009) about the identification, assessment, and development of readiness for the principalship in assistant principals.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this study is the principal. Accordingly, the informants of this study were practicing principals at the time of data collection.

Procedures

Sample

Site Selection. This study was conducted in an urban public school district in Texas because improving the quality of principalship candidates is an issue of particular interest to large urban school districts which face similar challenges in recruiting and retaining effective school leaders. The site was selected because it met the National Center for Education Statistics criteria of an "urban school district" because it is located in a metropolitan area with a population of at least 250,000 residents.

The district has over 80,000 enrolled students and operates 100+ schools. African Americans (9%) and Hispanics (60%) comprise the majority of all students enrolled. Approximately 64% of all students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch; approximately 50% meet the state-defined criteria for being at risk of dropping out or not graduating within four years; and, nearly one-third are classified as "Limited English Proficient."

According to 2011 data from the Achievement Excellence Indicator System of the State of Texas, 23 campuses in this district received the highest rating of *Exemplary*; 33

schools received the next highest rating of *Recognized*; 48 were rated *Academically Acceptable*, and 7 received the lowest rating of *Academically Unacceptable* based on student performance on standardized tests and other criteria (such as attendance and dropout rates). In the federal accountability system, 57% of the district's school met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards, 40% failed to meet AYP standards, and 3% received no rating.

Participant selection. Purposeful and convenience sampling was utilized to recruit participants for this study. The criteria used to guide the recruitment and selection of participants for the study sought current principals who have supported, developed, or endorsed two assistant principals for promotion to the principalship. Following the procedure required by the school district, all principals were contacted via e-mail by the district's external research coordinator. In that message, the principals were informed of the approved study and were provided with a district-developed overview using information from my research request application. The overview briefly described the study, identified me as the lead investigator, and asked the principals to notify the district's research coordinator directly if they were interested in participating. Over the course of the next two weeks, the research coordinator forwarded to me the names and contact information of six interested principals and I was cleared to contact them directly for recruitment.

Although the district's overview incorrectly listed the minimum criteria as having at least one former assistant principal promoted to the principalship, all six of these

principals met the preferred qualification of having at least two promoted assistant principals as was defined in the proposal approved by my dissertation committee. I then followed the university's Institutional Review Board-approved (IRB) procedures to obtain the principals' informed consent to participate; all six principals granted consent. Four of the participants were elementary principals and two were middle school principals. As a group, they averaged 32 years of experience in the field and 15 years of service in principalship. The schools they lead are diverse in size, level, and student demographics, and have consistently earned above-average accountability ratings for student achievement during the principals' tenures. Moreover, of particular relevance to this study, these principals have had 22 assistant principals promoted to principalship while under their supervision.

In order to obtain the perspective of the participants' protégés about whether they agreed that their mentors played a substantive role in their professional development, I asked each participant to identify two protégés I could contact about completing a two-question survey. Specifically, the survey sought the following information: 1) whether the protégé agreed that their former principal had played a meaningful role in grooming them to perform successfully in the principalship, and 2) an explanation of their answer to the first question through an optional, open-ended item. All but one principal provided me the name and contact information of protégés, and I obtained only one protégé's response, so this single data element is not reported in my findings.

Data Collection

Three principles of data collection (Yin, 2009) were employed to answer the research questions and promote trustworthiness – or the truthfulness – of the study's findings and conclusions. First, evidence was obtained using two data gathering strategies, allowing me to triangulate informants' responses and perspectives in the data analysis process. Second, a case study database was maintained to store all documents associated with the study. Third, a chain of evidence was established connecting collected data to the research questions and the conclusions drawn from the findings. What follows is an explanation of these measures.

Data gathering strategies. This study employed two data collection strategies, each with corresponding protocols: participant questionnaires and individual interviews. Below, each strategy is discussed in terms of their sequence in the study.

Questionnaire. Immediately before beginning their interview, each principal completed a questionnaire. The questionnaire asked them provide profile information such as the number of years they had been in education, how many years they had been a principal, how many years they had served in their current assignment, and how many assistant principals they had intentionally supported, developed, or endorsed for promotion to principalship. The questionnaire also asked the participants to indicate their level of agreement on a five point Likert-type scale with propositions about potential and readiness for the principalship. Each principal's responses informed questions I then asked during the interview process, and the principals' aggregate responses to the

statements about readiness for the principalship reported as findings in Chapter 4.

Interviews. One-on-one interviews (Mertens, 2005) were conducted with the six principals who volunteered to serve as informants for this study. The interviews were conducted in each principal's office and were completed in one sitting at the request of each principal. Each phase of the interview varied in length and the total interview time averaged 90 minutes. Three interviews exceeded this average and lasted two hours.

I used semi-structured protocols (see Appendix C) to conduct the interviews, allowing the participants to generally influence the direction of the conversation. I asked follow up questions for clarification, to probe intriguing answers, and to gather information to compare to other participants' responses.

The interviews searched for the principals' understanding of readiness for the principalship based on their life histories in education. Following the *in-depth interview model* (Seidman, 2006), each principal's interview consisted of three distinct phases. The first part focused on the principal's educational and career path to becoming qualified to identify, assess, and develop readiness for the principalship among assistant principals. The questions in this phase of the interview allowed the principals to self-select the starting point of their reflection, resulting in their narratives beginning at different at times. Some principals began their reflection at the time when they entered school as a child. Others, in contrast, began when they were in college or entered the profession as a teacher. The point of emphasis in this part of the interview was to understand which and how experiences shaped the principal's work with assistant principals.

The second phase of the interview focused on the details of the principal's experience in working with assistant principals and developing them for the principalship. These interview questions asked each principal to talk about the assistant principals with whom they had worked and to describe how they supported or developed these individuals during the time they supervised them. The principals also were asked about whether and how they knew each assistant principal had the potential to be a principal and/or were ready to perform successfully in that role. The overarching goal of this interview phase was to understand which criteria the principals associated with potential and readiness for the principalship and how they assessed these criteria.

The third interview phase prompted the principal to reflect on the first two phases in order to help me understand their conception of readiness for the principalship with regard to how it is defined, how it can be assessed, and how it can be developed in assistant principals. An additional aim of this part of the interview was to understand how the principals perceived their own role in developing assistant principals to become ready to transition successfully to the principalship.

Case study database. The database I kept for this study consisted of three essential components of a case study: field notes, documents, and narratives (Yin, 2009). The field notes summarized the main points discussed in the interview and those comments that stood out. I also used the field notes to identify emergent patterns and questions that came to mind for further examination in subsequent interviews or to

consider for analysis upon completion of all the interviews. I typically wrote up these notes within a day of conducting the interview, occasionally doing so within two days.

The documents utilized for this study primarily serve administrative and data gathering purposes. Examples of administrative documents are the introductory letter and informed consent form which were provided to prospective participants. Other administrative documents such as e-mail communications and approvals to conduct the study were also filed in the database. Data collection documents consisted of the questionnaires, the interview protocols, and the interview transcripts.

The narratives I kept were in the form of reflective journal entries which I began before the data collection phase and maintained throughout the study until completion of the data analysis phase. I made the first two entries before participant recruitment began as I wanted to record my thoughts for the purpose of *bracketing* (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), i.e., suspending judgment and interpretation of collected data before appropriate to do so. First, I reflected on my interest in and rationale for studying readiness for the principalship and for focusing on assistant principals. This exercise was not only useful for bracketing, it also help me develop the *elevator description* of the study which I have delivered numerous times in the past several months. In the second journal entry, I answered the interview protocol questions myself in order to define my views on identification, development, and assessment of readiness for the principalship. These journal entries allowed me to define any anticipated presuppositions (Hycner, 1985) before the data collection process began, and I refer to them at three specific times during

the course of the study. The first occasion was after half the participants had been interviewed; I wanted to be sure that I was not prioritizing certain responses by probing the participants further. The second time I revisited my anticipated presuppositions was after all interviews had been conducted and before beginning a comprehensive analysis of the data. My goal at this time was to be mindful of what I might be inclined to look for and validate as findings. The third and final time I referred to these presuppositions was upon completion of reporting the findings in Chapter 4. This allowed me to compare the findings to my presuppositions and use the chain of evidence to verify that the participants' voices – not mine – emerged. Subsequent journal entries focused on the data generated by the participants or the knowledge base used to make sense of the findings.

Chain of evidence. The concept of an *evidence chain* is based on a principle of investigative science which maintains that conclusions must be drawn directly from the evidence. Maintaining a chain of evidence in a case study allows a reader to follow the connection between the research questions explored and the conclusions drawn by the researcher (Yin, 2009).

In this study, the chain of evidence begins with the findings from the literature review. The questions this study seeks to answer are grounded in and stem from empirical research on leadership potential and educational leadership. For example, the decision to tap the practical expertise of select principals parallels McCall's (1994) selection of key informants in his study about identifying executive leadership potential

in business. Additionally, my findings are examined through the lenses of two established theoretical frameworks: the *Integrated Model of Potential* (Silzer & Church, 2009) and *Leader Developmental Readiness* (Avolio & Hannah, 2008, 2009).

The second link in the chain of evidence consists of the documented procedures employed to conduct this study. The case study database described above serves as a physical record of the study. The notes, documents, and narratives provide tangible evidence and support that the data was collected and analyzed in accordance with research expectations and procedural definitions.

The final link in the chain is this case study report which: 1) identifies the problem this study aims to address; 2) documents the research questions guiding the study; 3) explains the research design and methods employed to investigate the questions; 4) reports the findings; and 5) discusses the implications of the findings to policy and practice.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is a systematic, comprehensive, yet flexible, process that allows the researcher to connect the findings from the data and purpose of the study (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997). It is an ongoing, reflective process conducted concurrently while gathering data, making interpretations, and gathering reports (Creswell, 2009). To this end, I generally followed Creswell's (2009) six-step data analysis process:

1. Organize and prepare the data for analysis.

2. Read through the data to get a general impression of findings.
3. Begin the analysis with a coding process.
4. Use the coding process to generate a description of the people, setting, code categories, and themes for analysis.
5. Decide how the emergent findings will be reported.
6. Interpret and make meaning of the data. (pp. 185-191)

I also adhered to the four principles Yin (2008) outlined to guide case study data analysis. First, I made sure all relevant data was included in the analysis. Second, I examined the data for areas of agreement and disagreement in the participants' responses. Third, I highlighted the most significant and meaningful findings that both aligned to the purpose of the study and addressed the research questions. Finally, mindful of potential limitations that conducting this study as an insider might create, I allowed my knowledge and perspective (Hays & Sigh, 2012) as a former principal to be part of the analysis.

The first step in Creswell's process is preparing the raw data for the coding process. Before the first interview, I uploaded my own responses to the interview protocol questions to ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis software program. After each interview, I filed interview documents in the case study database. I then uploaded my field notes to ATLAS.ti. Finally, I transcribed the interviews and uploaded them to ATLAS.ti.

To gain a general impression of the data, I reviewed each document upon entering it into the case study database or, as appropriate, uploading it to ATLAS.ti. Once all the

interviews had been completed, I re-read the participants' questionnaire responses, my field notes, the interview transcripts, and my reflective journal entries to gain a general impression of the data.

Creswell's third step in the data analysis process focuses on the coding process. Coding refers to the practice of assigning labels to units of text to act as 'tags' for later retrieval and/or indexing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The coding process involves organizing the data into chunks or segments in order to derive meaning from them (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). By coding the data, the researcher is pushed to make interpretations about the meaning of these units of text (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). As explained by Glesne (1999):

> By putting like-minded pieces together into data clumps, you create an organizational framework. You first develop, out of the data, major code clumps by which to sort the data. Then you code the contents of each major code clump, thereby breaking down the major code into numerous subcodes. Eventually, you can place the various data clumps in a meaningful sequence that contributes to the chapters or sections of your manuscript (pg. 135).

Therefore, I began the coding process by using descriptive coding and *in vivo* coding to identify units of meaning. *Descriptive coding* summarizes the topic in a passage with a noun or phrase (Saldana, 2009). Forty-one (41) codes were created in this first coding step. I then used *in vivo* coding to analyze the data a second time. According to Saldana, *in vivo coding* involves taking a word or phrase directly from the data source to label an idea associated with the passage. Seventy-four (74) new codes emerged from this step. Although this initial review was admittedly inefficient in terms of developing

an analytical focus by identifying emergent themes, I felt being more inclusive at this stage would serve my goal to reduce bias in the findings.

Before proceeding to the next step in the coding process, I examined the codes created to this point for apparent redundancy, connections, or emergent patterns of meaning. This step narrowed the code list to fifty-two (52) and identified twelve (12) preliminary response patterns. As an example of how this process promoted trustworthiness of the findings, the connection between "listening" and "readiness for the principalship" emerged as a response pattern at this time in a manner that differed greatly from my own anticipated presuppositions and was ultimately substantiated as a finding. While I associated effective communication as an indicator of readiness for principalship, I neither identified "listening" as part of my definition of effective communication nor considered its importance as did the principals. To complete the coding process, I used starter codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to compare the data to the knowledge base in extant research (Creswell, 2009). Specifically, the codes aligned to the components of the two frameworks described in the literature review: the *Integrated Model of Potential* (Silzer & Church, 2009) and *Leader Developmental Readiness* (Avolio & Hannah, 2008, 2009).

In the fourth step of data analysis process, the puzzle pieces began to take shape so to speak, and I put them together through the process of *data source triangulation* (Hays & Singh, 2012). This process involves examining multiple forms of evidence for completeness and consistency to confirm the *groundedness* of emergent themes. I

began by developing profiles of the participants based on the information they provided in the questionnaire as well their responses to the interview questions. I also ran analytic reports on ATLAS.ti to identify potential themes as well as anomalies in the data and coding patterns. This allowed me to confirm areas of congruence, such as the strength of the relationship between shared leadership and how the principals described working with their assistant principals. I attempted to utilize *member checking* (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) to confirm with the participants that their intended meanings were accurately represented in the findings, but none followed through with my request for assistance (two principals acknowledged receipt of my e-mail request but did not communicate further). During the two weeks that I awaited participant responses, I generated ideas about rival explanations (Yin, 2009) that might dispel the explanation patterns that had emerged, forcing myself to return to the chain of evidence to validate propositions. For example, I questioned whether the principals who served as experts for this study legitimately played a role in their former assistant principals' attainment of the principalship, so I revisited the *Approach to Developing APs* code and all associated quotes for examples of actions and processes they described in their interviews.

I concluded the analysis process by combining Creswell's fifth and sixth steps in the data analysis which call for the researcher to make meaning of the findings and make decisions about how the findings will be represented in final report. In this case study, the themes that emerged aligned discretely to the research questions guiding the

study so there was little to decide in this regard. In Chapter 4, I present the findings about how the principals define readiness, how they assess readiness in their own assistant principals, and how they develop their assistant principals to perform successfully as principals. Looking ahead further to Chapter 5, I situate the lessons learned (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) from the study against the body of knowledge in the field. I also discuss practical and policy implications the findings support, and I close with ideas for further study of the topic.

Limitations

Despite measures taken in the design, data collection, and data analysis elements of this study, I acknowledge limitations that could impact the outcomes of this study. The first limitation concerns the participant sample. Due to an unplanned site change, candidate recruitment began in June when school was out of session and many principals already had other scheduled commitments. This likely impacted the sample size and diversity, potentially impacting the robustness of the findings. For example, having an equal number of middle school principals and at least two high school principals would have allowed for school level to be a consideration in the analysis.

The second limitation, as discussed earlier in this chapter, centers on my role as an inside-researcher. Aware of this potential influence, I did my best to use this understanding productively (Maxwell, 2005) throughout the study.

Summary

This chapter began by explaining the rationale for using a qualitative approach to exploring the research questions this study seeks to answer. I employ a case study design to best understand a phenomenon from the perspective of a particular group. I describe the procedures I took to collect data, analyze the findings, and promote trustworthiness in the findings and conclusions. In the next chapter, I report what I learned from conducting this case study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

As noted in Chapter 2, to date there are few educational leadership studies which examine assistant principals' potential or readiness to successfully assume the responsibility of the principalship. The purpose of this study is to therefore investigate principals' perceptions about potential and readiness for the principalship among assistant principals. Review of the extant literature supports that leadership readiness can be thought of as an *assessment of fit*, or congruence, between individual capacity and situational context. Whether someone is deemed *to have potential* or to be ready for leadership depends on the extent to which his/her leadership knowledge, skill, and thinking align to the duties, responsibilities, and challenges of the role and its context. As it pertains to this study, this issue suggests that readiness for the principalship depends on the match between a candidate's realized potential and the school to which they would be assigned. Examining this issue through a case study design allowed me to explore a particular principal group's perspective about this study's questions:

1. What counts as potential and readiness for the principalship?
2. How do principals assess or evaluate potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals?
3. How do principals develop potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals?

This chapter presents the findings derived from one-on-one, in-depth interviews with six principals who have had at least two former assistant principals promoted to the role of principal. I open this chapter with a descriptive profile of each principal developed from his/her reflections of their path to becoming a principal (as well as to becoming an informant of this study), their experience of working with assistant principals, and how they collaborated with me to make sense of what readiness for the principalship means to them. In order to contextualize their individual and collective responses, the profile provides a general description of each principal's school at the time of data collection, their professional background, and their apparent beliefs about potential and readiness for the principalship.

The sections that follow highlight the findings that emerged from the interviews in which the six principals discussed the criteria, assessment, and development aspects of readiness for the principalship. First though, I profile each informant principal. At the conclusion of this chapter, I summarize the major findings to be discussed in Chapter 5.

Participant Profiles

As discussed in Chapter 3, the criteria used for selecting this study's informants sought out principals who have developed, supported, and/or endorsed at least two assistant principals for promotion during the time they worked together. In the design phase of this study, I called this candidate profile a *principal developer*. Through the course of conducting the study however, I came to understand that while this concept of

principal developer may have merit, it is not defined by a singular output measure such as the one I use in this study: a principal who has developed, supported, and endorsed at least two assistant principals formally under his/her supervision for promotion to the principalship. Despite this design limitation, I strongly believe that the credibility of the principals who I profile in this section is supported by their professional accomplishments and contributions to the field, particularly with regard to the development of educational leaders.

Principal DeAngelo

Principal DeAngelo is the principal of a middle school in an affluent neighborhood community. The school enrolls approximately 1,000 students, about one-third of which are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. During Mr. DeAngelo's 13-year tenure as principal, the school has consistently earned *Academically Acceptable* or *Recognized* ratings in the Texas Achievement Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), the state-sanctioned accountability system that evaluates schools based on certain performance indicators such as state-mandated achievement tests, attendance, completion rates, and dropout rates.

All of Mr. DeAngelo's 30 years' experience in education was gained at the middle school level. He began his career in education as a teacher in New England. He also taught at a military school abroad and in an affluent suburban district adjacent to his current district. He served as an assistant principal for a highly-successful principal who

believed that growing others for leadership was a fundamental part of a principal's job. It was clear during his interview that Mr. DeAngelo held his mentor in very high regard, even stating that "everything [he] know[s] about school leadership came from him." Two of Mr. DeAngelo's assistant principals went on to become principals after working under him.

Principal DeAngelo's interview revealed that he considers several factors to be indicators of principalship readiness: an orientation for continuous growth and improvement, instructional leadership, the ability to connect with those you lead, and a passion for doing the job. He spoke of assistant principal development as a structured progression of experiences with increasing difficulty, complexity or responsibility, one that he facilitates as the school's leader.

Principal Elaissi

Principal Elaissi leads an elementary school that has consistently earned a Texas AEIS rating of *Recognized*. The school enrolls approximately 550 students and is located in an economically-diverse neighborhood. While the families of some children who attend the school live in homes valued well over $500,000, nearly 75% of the student body is eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

Ms. Elaissi began her professional career in business and came to education feeling it was her calling. She has worked in public education for 30 years and has served as a principal for sixteen, the last ten of which at this school. She is the only

principal interviewed for this study who said she entered education intending to become a principal, inspired by an elementary teacher she called her role model in education. She is also the only principal in this study who did not work for one with a record of developing, supporting, and/or endorsing their assistant principals for the principalship. Instead, she navigated her own path from being a suburban-area teacher to serving as principal in schools within diverse urban communities.

Principal Elaissi's interview did not point to any discernible patterns or themes about her work with her own assistant principals despite the fact that two of them have been promoted to the principalship during the time they served under her. In fact, she candidly observed that the most thought she has ever given to the issue was while sitting for this interview. What was clear, however, is that she attributes her own attainment of the position to a focused drive and strong work ethic. She similarly believes that a strong work ethic and the ability to respond to the needs of all stakeholders are essential to readiness for the principalship.

Principal Lancaster

Principal Lancaster has been a public school educator for 31 years. For the last five years, she has led a prestigious magnet middle school that draws its students from all over the city. Consistent with its competitive admission design, the school consistently earns an *Exemplary* rating in the Texas AEIS. Despite its academic selectiveness, the school enrolls a diverse student body.

Prior to her current assignment, Ms. Lancaster worked as a middle school special education teacher, an elementary assistant principal, and an elementary principal in her current district. She maintains that she never wanted to become a principal and her movement into administration occurred solely upon the urging and encouragement of her principal who also supported several other teachers to become school leaders. As an assistant principal, she served as Interim Principal during a leave of absence taken by her principal. She performed well in that role, even earning praise from her teachers, and succeeded her principal upon her departure. To date, she has had six assistant principals become principals while working for her.

Ms. Lancaster views readiness as a differentiated reality for each individual, not a standardized measure. She attributes this perspective, in part, to growing up in a large family in which individual differences were nurtured and celebrated. She prioritizes collaboration, instructional leadership, and a genuine desire to work in a particular setting as essential traits of a successful principal.

Principal Rutherford

Principal Rutherford is the leader at an elementary school which annually enrolls approximately 400 students, is well-respected, and consistently earns an *Exemplary* rating in the Texas AEIS. The school is located in an economically wealthy neighborhood and serves a diverse student body comprised of residents of the community, children of university students living in graduate student housing nearby, and children residing in the

city's downtown homeless shelter. One half of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and as many as 25% of the students at any given time are non-native English speakers.

Ms. Rutherford's career in education spans 35 years, the majority of which were spent in public schools. She began as a special education teacher, a role she says she knew she wanted to pursue since entering college. Upon leaving the classroom, she served as an assistant principal for one year before being appointed to the role of an elementary principal. She has subsequently served as a principal at various high-profile schools throughout the city for over 29 years. Ms. Rutherford has been in her current assignment for nine years. Five of her assistant principals have become principals while working for her.

Like two other principals in this study, Ms. Rutherford did not aspire to the principalship. Her thought to obtain an administrator credential only came upon the career advice offered by a professor during her pursuit of a graduate degree in special education. The opportunity to visit schools as a university supervisor of student teachers allowed her to observe and work with principals who she credits with opening her eyes to the potential impact of effective leadership. Driven by the inclination to form meaningful relationships with others, Ms. Rutherford saw the principalship as a means to touch the lives of more students and families than she could in the classroom. She proudly proclaims that her emphasis on the importance of relationships defines her to this day.

Principal Rutherford sees the ability and willingness to get to know and connect with all stakeholders as essential to readiness for the principalship, because it "promotes the ability to work together productively and understand the needs of individuals, groups, and the school community." Principal Rutherford shares the responsibilities of running and leading the school with her assistant principal, prioritizing job-embedded leadership opportunities that develop or refine organization, stress management, and instructional leadership capacity.

Principal Stover

Principal Stover leads an urban elementary school which, during her tenure, has consistently earned a *Recognized* rating in the Texas AEIS. Ms. Stover's school is located in a neighborhood primarily comprised of families living in multi-family housing units. The enrollment at her school is consistently above 700 students and she estimates that approximately 20% of her students enroll or withdraw in the midst of each academic year. More than 90% of the students in her school are eligible for discounted or free lunch, and approximately 60% are non-native English speakers.

Ms. Stover has worked in public education for a total of 37 years, the last twelve as principal at her current school. Her teaching career began in a high school in South Texas. Before moving to a school leadership role, she worked for fifteen years as a district-level coordinator for Gifted & Talented Education in her current district. Four of her assistant principals have become principals and she currently serves as Mentor

Principal to administrator interns in the district's leadership development program, a principal pipeline initiative.

Principal Stover emphatically points out that becoming a principal was not something to which she aspired. During her first year as an assistant principal, she worked with a first-year principal and another assistant principal new to the role. She described the situation as having "no team atmosphere" and the principal as an "authoritative manager, not a leader." After one year, she transferred to another school. In her second assistant principal assignment, Ms. Stover worked for a second-year principal in a shared leadership arrangement where each led aspects of the school according to their strengths. Ms. Stover thrived in this collaborative environment and she credits her principal for nurturing her development by demonstrating trust and confidence in her as a school leader. She performed successfully as Interim Principal during her principal's leave of absence and ultimately succeeded him.

Principal Stover's interview revealed that she values teaming and shared leadership responsibilities with her assistant principals around each person's areas of strength. Her view of readiness for the principalship emphasizes understanding and the employment of a systems approach to managing the school and instructional leadership. She believes everyday performance outcomes, responsiveness to and reliance on feedback, and a healthy balance between personal and professional priorities are important considerations for assessing readiness for the principalship.

Principal Zamora

Principal Zamora heads a small elementary school in a low-income community. The majority of the school's children reside in single-family homes. Enrollment at Ms. Zamora's school is typically around 300 students, more than 95% of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. During Ms. Zamora's seven years as principal, the school has consistently earned *Exemplary* or *Recognized* AEIS ratings. Three of her assistant principals have become principals.

Ms. Zamora brought a very diverse background of experience to her principalship. She began her 34-year career in public education as a bilingual teacher with a strong interest in social justice stemming from her scholastic experience as an English language learner. She was among the first teachers selected to provide gifted and talented program services to students served in the bilingual education program of her current district. Upon leaving the classroom, Ms. Zamora took on various roles at the Texas Education Agency where she had extensive opportunities to visit and audit schools for compliance and recognition purposes. She credits this experience for opening her eyes to a variety of possibilities and developing her deeply-rooted knowledge that all children are capable of achieving at high levels. Ms. Zamora then worked as the Director of Special Programs and Populations in a mid-sized suburban district. She left that position for family reasons and returned to her district as an instructional specialist. While in that role, she was promoted to Interim Assistant Principal and worked for one year before transferring to another school. She credits much of what she knows about

leading and running a school to the principal she served in that assignment. Ms. Zamora became principal at her current school three years later after being invited to apply for the job by the district's administration.

Conversations with Principal Zamora revealed that she believes in a structured, on-the-job training approach and employs a shared leadership teaming arrangement. Principal Zamora believes in strategic and targeted development around areas of weakness in knowledge and skill. She believes potential and readiness for the principalship is grounded in the belief of children's capability, instructional leadership, personal responsibility, and individual well-roundedness.

Summary

The principals in this study speak from a wealth experience. As a group, they average over 32 years in the field and approximately fifteen years of service in the principalship. The schools they lead are diverse in size, level, and student demographics and have consistently earned above-average accountability ratings for student achievement. Moreover, of particular relevance to this study, they have had 22 assistant principals promoted to the principalship while under their supervision. What follows is a description of what counts as readiness for the principalship stemming from the perspective of this experience.

Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Each principal was asked to complete a brief survey before beginning the first phase of the interview process. Table 1.1 reports the results of a survey each principal completed before beginning the interview process. The survey asked the principals to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with five propositions pertaining to readiness for the principalship, defined as "having the knowledge, ability, and mindset necessary for navigating immediate organizational or job-specific challenges." Responses were organized on a 5-point Likert-type scale: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree).

Table 1.1: Principals' Responses to Propositions about Readiness for the Principalship

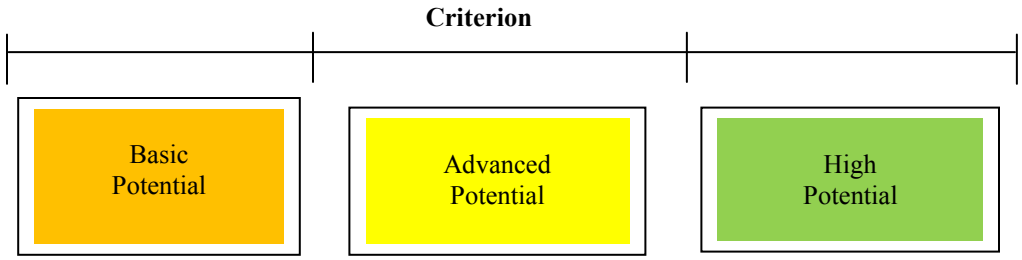
	Response Average
I believe it is possible to know when an assistant principal is ready for the principalship.	4.2
I believe it is possible to assess readiness for the principalship in assistant principals.	4.0
I believe it is possible to develop assistant principals to be ready for the principalship.	4.5
I know what characteristics reveal that an assistant principal is ready for the principalship.	4.3
I know how to develop an assistant principal to become ready for the principalship.	4.0

The principals' collective agreement that the phenomenon of principalship readiness for the principalship can be defined, assessed, and developed serves as a foundation for the findings that follow.

What Counts as Readiness for the Principalship

As established earlier in this chapter, the principals agreed that readiness for the principalship can be defined and identified in assistant principals. In this section, I highlight the key findings of the criteria the principals associated with readiness for the principalship; these criteria fall into the categories of *professional capacity* and *leadership disposition*. For each criterion element, I use the graphic represented in Table 1.1 to summarize the evidence the principals associated with basic, advanced, and high potential. The graphic adheres to the way the principals collectively described each element of professional capacity and leadership disposition. The orange box at the far left defines what they reported seeing in their assistant principals who, in their opinion, still had much to learn or had important areas to yet develop before assuming the principalship successfully. The middle box in yellow describes evidence the principals felt was more advanced but not the strongest indicator of potential success in the role. At the far right, the box in green identifies what the principals reported as evidence they saw in their assistant principals with a high potential for success as a principal. As the principals described it, the indicators attributed to each level are independent from the others, meaning an individual does not necessarily progress developmentally from *Basic* to *Advanced* and then to *High*. It is possible for principalship candidates to demonstrate the potential in any, some, or all of the levels. Therefore, a holistic assessment of readiness can be thought of as a summative calculation of the boxes.

Figure 4.1: Levels of Potential



Professional Capacity

A big part of what it takes to succeed as a principal is the knowledge and skill needed to manage school operations. Leading a school that runs smoothly, has a positive climate conducive to teaching and learning, and works effectively to help students achieve at high levels requires a greater level of knowledge and skill. The principals in this study pointed to instructional leadership and organizational management as essential pre-requisites assistant principals should demonstrate in order to transition successfully to the principalship.

Instructional leadership. The principals overwhelmingly agreed that, at the very least, assistant principals must be able to discern quality from mediocrity in teacher performance if they wish to transition successfully into principalship. Principal Rutherford shared her view on this:

> I think the principal has to know best practices. I can walk into a band or orchestra class, I could walk into a German class and have no idea what the teacher is saying, but I can know if there were best practices being used, and the principal has to know that.

More advanced candidates also understand how to help teachers grow and raise the quality of their instruction. Principal DeAngelo spoke to this: "They know instruction—good instruction. Then [there is] that whole piece of evaluating teachers and helping them grow." The capacity described by the principals as *instructional leadership* entails a much greater degree of knowledge and skill, however. Principal Zamora captured the essence of this standard:

> I'm talking about instruction to the level that when a kid is struggling you could have [an] explicit conversation with that teacher about where to go to look for resources with the kinds of questions that you ask [to] help that teacher dissect what's really going on and then be able to *get it* [at] that discreet level. I'm talking about that high level of instructional knowledge.

This suggests that instructional leadership knowledge manifests itself in a spectrum of instructional leadership behaviors. *Readiness evidence*, if you will, reveals itself through strategic knowledge utilization. Assistant principals who are ready for the principalship demonstrate their instructional leadership capacity by intentionally and discreetly guiding and facilitating teaching that promotes student achievement. Extending this logic further, assistant principals with less-developed instructional leadership capacity will work to improve instruction and teacher performance generically, without particular purpose to impact student achievement.

Where the principals disagreed was in the degree to which mastery of content knowledge is important. Half argued that a principal must know content area curriculum very well. Principal Rutherford expressed, "I think that [the principal] needs to be *really*, *really* well-versed in curriculum and needs to be the curriculum leader at the school."

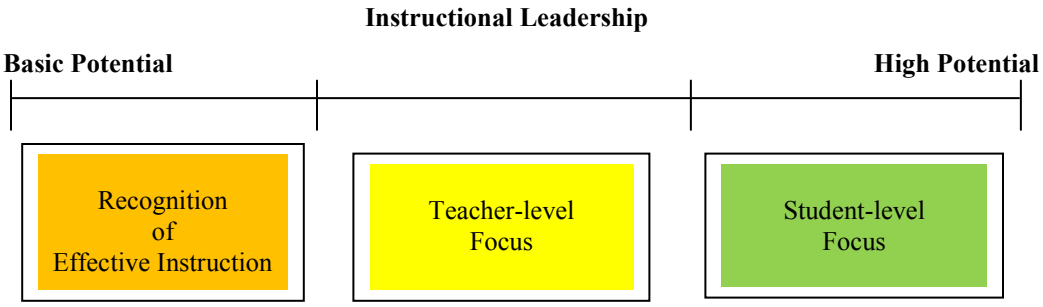
Principal DeAngelo agreed with his colleague when he said principals should "know curriculum like the back of their hands." In contrast, others argued that curriculum knowledge was a secondary consideration to the ability to recognize, support, and develop quality teacher practice. Principal Stover spoke to this when she said, "It's easy to get hung up on ideas like standards, curriculum, reform…and overlook that none of these things mean[s] anything outside of the specific, purposeful interaction between educators." Principal Lancaster expressed a similar perspective:

> I've got to understand reading and math curriculum as a middle school principal, but I don't think you have to know it as much as being willing to learn it. As an elementary principal, you have to know what you want good learning to look like and at middle school you have to bring it to scale.

While Principal Lancaster's point highlights the distinction between needing to know content curriculum well versus the willingness to learn about it in order to facilitate school improvement at scale, it is important to note that the principals as a group did not share her view that such a difference is level-specific.

Thus, in this case, content knowledge appears to not necessarily be a pre-requisite for a successful transition to the principalship. Instead, as discussed in Chapter 2, the match between a candidate's mastery of content knowledge juxtaposed against the contextual demands of the school may be the best way to determine readiness during the selection process.

Figure 4.2: Instructional Leadership as Levels of Potential



Organizational management. What the principals identified as important to school management proficiency went beyond basic job knowledge such as textbook inventory, testing, professional development, personnel interviewing, lesson observations, and instructional program design. Evidence of readiness for the principalship in this area involves the knowledge and skill to design, implement, and problem-solve structures and systems in order to promote and support student achievement and effective instruction. Principal DeAngelo's opinion about needing to be a *master* of the master schedule illustrates this point:

> You gotta' make sure that it gets done and it gets done well. The master schedule drives so much. You gotta' make sure you've got the right philosophy for the master schedule – which is student-centered and teacher-centered. In our particular case, we want to make sure we have core teachers off in each grade level so they can plan extensively during the day. And then you can look at interventions. There's all kinds of models out there right now to make sure that when the kids don't *get it*, we provide intervention time or we provide enrichment time.

Although Principal DeAngelo's comments focused on one aspect of school management – the master schedule – this example speaks to the ideas about readiness that the principals emphasized. First, in order to be successful, a principal must know which things must be done to run a school, and s/he must have basic capacity to ensure these things get done. When describing what this basic capacity looks like in assistant principals, Principal Stover described it as "management and people skills," a phrase which aptly represents a basic level of proficiency the principals felt a candidate for the principalship must possess. More advanced candidates would understand that organizational structures like the master schedule could serve as a means to facilitate qualitative interests, such as ensuring teachers have common planning times and providing time for implementing instructional intervention. Principal Lancaster made the link between this facilitative capacity and instructional leadership when she talked about "knowing how to put systems in place to do the instructional leader work." Individuals who are more advanced still, however, possess the discernment that reveals the highest level of proficiency identified by the principals: *systems thinking* or a "big picture" perspective as the principals commonly termed it. *Systems thinking*, per Principal Stover, means: "Everything is connected, interrelated. You can't mess with one part of it (i.e., a school) without affecting another part of it." The principals agreed that assistant principals who were ready to transition to the principalship understood how to capitalize on and strategically utilize organizational management as a driver of change, quality, and improvement at scale.

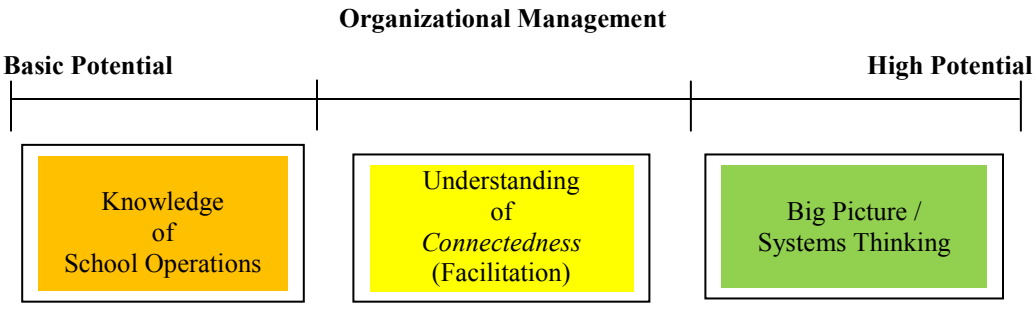
Where the principals disagreed was in their views about whether and the extent to which capacity and experience with compliance issues was important to determining readiness for the principalship. As a point of clarification, the informants did not say that compliance issues were not important; in fact, they agreed that knowing the laws, rules, and procedures for compulsory and elective programs is a fundamental part of a principal's job. Their distinction stemmed from whether mastery in this area was a pre-requisite for success in the role. Those who maintained that compliance knowledge is not essential argued that it could be learned after becoming a principal. Speaking to this point, Principal Rutherford said, "There are compliance issues that anyone with intelligence can learn. You [can] go through a series of modules where you learn how to do that." Others, like Principal Stover, agreed that mastery of compliance was not essential to readiness for the principalship because there are "go-to people on the campus whose expertise can be tapped" to ensure proper compliance. For example, many teachers are sufficiently knowledgeable about the due process and instructional facilitation requirements in special education and bilingual education – two programs commonly cited – to make up for their principal's lack of familiarity in these areas. Additionally, the principals in this group argued that districts often provide adequate support to effectively compensate for weaknesses in these areas.

In contrast, however, others argued that principals must know compliance expectations for all core programs, such as special education and bilingual education, precisely because, as Principal Lancaster expressed, "You have to have it down or it can

derail you." Principal Zamora agreed but shared a different viewpoint stemming from her extensive background in special programs and populations. She described compliance knowledge as "essential" because related programs and services are in place to address the opportunity gap for certain student populations for a reason. In her view, leadership capacity in this area is a matter of equity and social justice.

Because of the lack of agreement in this area, a clear distinction about minimum and advanced proficiency is not evident. Readiness, as it pertains to knowledge of and experience with compliance issues seems more appropriately to be a consideration of match than proficiency.

Figure 4.3: Organizational Management as Levels of Proficiency



Personal Dispositions

The principals' collective description of the personal qualities associated with readiness for the principalship emphasized a *way of being* as a leader. High-potential assistant principals with whom the principals worked consistently and appropriately demonstrated certain practices in the areas of communication, self-awareness, self-

management, and emotional stability. Further, the principals agreed that these ways of being are things that can be learned, improved upon, and developed through strategic effort. Principal Rutherford spoke to this developmental view as shared by the other participants:

> I do think that some people have innate leadership and charisma characteristics but I don't think that you can't be a successful principal just because that doesn't come naturally to you. I think you can build that and there are many principals that have very different personalities that I don't see as very charismatic and they're very good principals because they're steady and honest and do their job and they're respectful and they just have different styles.

The defining characteristics of being steady, honest, and respectful, which Principal Rutherford attributes to *good* principals, captures the spirit conducive to performing successfully as a principal. What follows describes the criteria the principals emphasized.

Communication. Communication is important to success as a principal because it's the medium through which instructional leadership and organizational management acts are – or are not – facilitated. Principal Zamora spoke to this emphatically when she said, "Everything that principals do is about communication. I mean the way you stand in front of the faculty. It's body language. It's communication, right? So communication is huge." Although the principals identified systems utilization, message clarity, and coherence as important factors in managing a school well, two deeper themes surfaced from their interviews which spoke to communication as more than a means to an end. Assistant principals with whom the principals worked closely and who were ready to

perform successfully in the principalship used communication for a greater purpose than facilitation; they used it to develop and strengthen relationships and to speak out against threats to equity and social justice.

The principals consistently mentioned that the tendency to build or strengthen relationships with students, staff, and parents was an indicator of a high-potential communication disposition. Principal Zamora's perspective captured the essence of this position:

> Principals need to be people that kids can connect to and develop a relationship with because relationship is the key. I mean that's the whole key. They're not going to get teachers to work with them if there's no relationship. Kids aren't goin' to respond to them.

When asked to describe how this quality can be identified in assistant principals, Principal DeAngelo said, "It relates to communication but it's more than that. People are comfortable with you…even drawn towards you. But it's just something about their personality that is attractive or makes people feel comfortable." Agreeing with her colleagues about the importance of communication, Principal Stover introduced a bit of a twist when she reflected, "The last couple of years, I feel like I'm missing out. I speak a little Spanish but I can't have a real conversation – say, with a parent. It's not the same." These examples describe the leadership act of connecting with constituents at a fundamental level, an idea the principals view as critical to success as a school leader.

Active, purposeful listening also emerged as an important indicator of readiness for the principalship. The informants felt *real* listening (i.e., not simply <u>waiting</u> for someone to finish talking before expressing one's own thoughts) not only demonstrated a

value and respect for others' opinions, but was instrumental to collaborative leadership. When asked to provide examples of what this looks like in real time, Principal DeAngelo said, "The assistant principals listen to the teachers, listen to the students, and lead with knowing their needs and their input." To emphasize a point made earlier about the spirit of communication the principals conveyed, Principal Rutherford described holding a genuine interest in understanding another's perspective, not merely listening to identify a source of information to exploit for one's own purpose; to her this would neither be honest or respectful:

> If you're a person that can listen carefully and can try and put yourself in someone else's point of view, you will more easily be able to figure out when to compromise, when not to compromise, when to be able to articulate something forceful in a direct but gentle way.

Every principal in this study also expressed his/her belief that a principal must possess the ability and willingness to advocate for issues of equity and social justice and/or speak out against threats to them. Principal DeAngelo described this inclination as "willingness to do the tough stuff. A willingness to confront people [who are] doing what they're not supposed to be doing." Moreover, the principals all framed this type of communication occurring in one particular context: one-on-one conversations with teachers. Principal Elaissi and Principal Zamora termed these as *critical conversations* because they involve providing a teacher with evaluative feedback and prescriptive guidance about his/her performance. According to Principal Zamora, principals need to be comfortable saying, "This is what I have observed. And this is what I <u>want</u> to see

happening." Principal Elaissi, recalling an assistant principal who was not accordingly disposed, elaborated further:

> You have to be able to do it, you have to be willing to do it, and you have to do it in a way, whichever your style is, that's effective and not off-putting and counterproductive. And with this individual it was more the disposition, she just wasn't willing to do it.

These conversations are also important to the ultimate effectiveness of both the teacher and the principal, as well as to the achievement of both the students and the school.

The third and final way that the principals talked about critical conversations concerned the need to handle them respectfully since a positive school climate attends to the needs and interests of the teachers' work environment, as much as it does to the students' learning environment. Principal Lancaster explained:

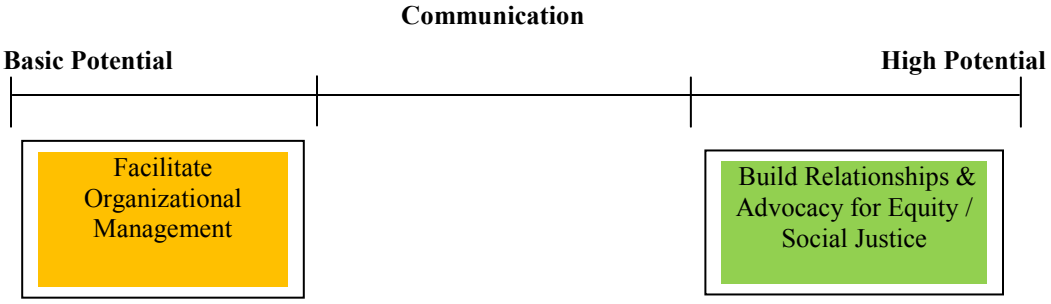
> You have to get teachers to do things, even ones that don't need to be there – but you still gotta' do it respectfully and with dignity…even [with] the sorriest teacher in the world, because they didn't come into teaching to not do a good job.

She went on to say that an administrator's inability or unwillingness to set aside his/her personal issues with someone is evidence s/he is not ready for the principalship. As if anticipating the argument against such a position, she continued, "You don't have to like someone, but you still have to work with them in the right." In this sense, critical conversations serve as a key to revealing a leader's core values as manifested in the sum and substance of one's actions.

In addition to the inability or unwillingness to set aside personal issues for the greater good of the school, the principals identified two other communication-related

characteristics that reveal a lack of readiness for principalship. The first concerns the view and use of information as a source of power. Principal Stover explained that she publicly withheld her support and endorsement for one assistant principal she worked with because that individual went so far as to say that the phrase "information is power" was a leadership rule she lived by, meaning she sought out and revealed information strategically for her own benefit, not that of the whole school organization. A second communication behavior the principals identified as problematic was the inability or unwillingness to filter one's comments appropriately. Principal Zamora, sharing her assessment of her current assistant principal, said, "She's got very strong personal opinions and I don't think she's learned to filter [them] to the degree that she needs to [in order] to be successful." Several principals identified this issue as especially common among recently-appointed assistant principals. It seemed that, over time, some individuals learned that a lack of filter was unproductive and that proper filtering served to promote their own and others' success.

Figure 4.4: Communication Skills as Levels of Potential



Self-Regulation. The principals consistently alluded to the loneliness of the position. Several talked about how seldom they receive formal feedback about their performance, except when things don't go well. In the words of Principal DeAngelo, "When you get this job, there's nobody telling you too much what to do. It's pretty much, 'You're on your own.'" Hence, the informants emphasized that it is essential for those candidates for the principalship to possess an honest and accurate assessment of their own strengths and weaknesses. Principal Zamora summed up her colleagues' position when she said, "You gotta' know when you're missing something." Thus, effective principals actively seek informal feedback from everyday occurrences. More important, the principals collectively pointed out that self-awareness is not the end goal; it is a prerequisite to acting in accordance with this knowledge in many circumstances. In sum, self-awareness and self-management work together in the process of self-regulation.

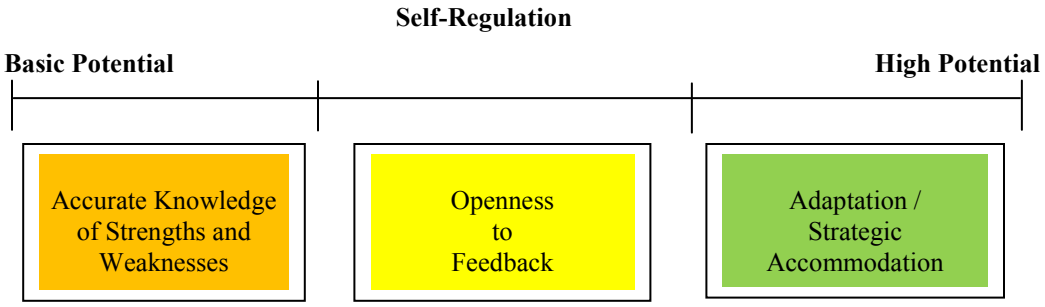
The principals spoke of three factors that appear to determine one's position on the continuum between potential and readiness in this area. First, one must have an honest and accurate image of his/her knowledge, skills, personality, and leadership style. An individual's degree of potential in this area depends on the depth and breadth of understanding of his/her own capacity. In citing a positive example of this concept, Principal Zamora described her current assistant principal as "painfully aware" of areas in which she needs to develop. Second, one's potential can be augmented by an openness to grow, regardless of current capacity. The principals described an early indicator of a healthy growth orientation as responsiveness to criticism. High-potential assistant

principals with whom the principals worked took criticism well and showed evidence of taking it to heart by modifying their future actions. Those with the greatest potential seemed to enter administration with the understanding that growth was instrumental to effective leadership; Principal Rutherford's comment elaborates:

> They would seek feedback. They would be open to growth experiences…They were very honest with themselves and would seek constructive feedback about how they were doing. Or they would ask a lot of questions like, 'How do you do that?

In contrast, assistant principals who either did not attain the principalship or were "counseled out" of administration by their principals for unsatisfactory performance, tended to "continually gravitate back to where they [were] comfortable and what they want[ed] to do," as Principal Elaissi described. Principal Rutherford referred to unproductive self-regulation as "causing fires" for the principal to extinguish. The third factor related to potential in this area concerned an individual's willingness to act as the situation requires for the greater good. As the principals consistently pointed out, the ultimate indicator of self-regulation is what Principal Lancaster described as "stepping aside," allowing others to lead when doing so serves the best interest of all stakeholders. Thus, the principals described readiness in this area of leadership as characterized by strategic acts based on awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses given the contextual circumstances.

Table 4.5: Self-Regulation as Levels of Potential



Emotional stability. The central ideas of self-awareness and self-management extend to a closely-related yet distinct characteristic of potential for the principalship. The principals also consistently spoke of the importance that a leader maintain a steady affect for the good of the organization because a principal's emotional state can impact the entire school. This is not to say that an effective school leader must be unemotional or stoic – to the contrary; the informants agreed that it is important for a principal to be true to him/herself, especially to his/her emotions at all times. What they emphasized, pertinent to this study, is that high-potential candidates for principalship tend to display a consistent range of emotions and manage stress effectively.

At a minimum, principalship candidates must understand that their own emotional state can affect everyone around them. Although this might seem obvious, Principal Lancaster commented that her experience has shown "when stress is getting the better of people, they don't realize it." More advanced proficiency in this area depends on the extent to which an individual is aware of his general affect and to factors that influence it. Managing one's thoughts and actions further defines development in this area. Principal

Zamora, admitting she's grown in this area during her years as a principal, talked about assistant principals needing to "model being calm" even when they are stressed. The ability and willingness to display an appropriate or productive emotional response "in the moment" is an even stronger indicator that an individual is ready for the leadership demands of principalship because such actions promote a positive work environment. Principal Rutherford addressed this:

> The best thing you can do is say to everyone, 'I'm feeling overwhelmed, a little stressed out, I'm going for a walk around the park, I'll be back in a little bit.' That shows the human side of you that causes people that to admire that you recognized it and you're stepping away.

In the principals' collective opinion, teachers and staff members are greatly helped in doing their job effectively when they can anticipate their principal's emotional response. Reflecting on their own longevity, but also on their assessment of what has helped their protégés succeed and persist in their role, the principals talked consistently about the importance of managing stress to maintain balance, optimism, and even physical wellness. Principal Zamora summed up her colleagues' responses when she described her beliefs about maintaining a healthy perspective:

> I just think that the work that we do is so hard, that we have to take delight in wherever we can find it. It's lonely being a principal, and you don't even want to use the energy to get mad about it.

Perhaps ironically – or contrary to what some might expect – every principal talked about the importance of a sense of humor as a means of keeping stress in check. The "ability to laugh," as they described it, helps get them through tough times which could otherwise

defeat or depress.

The principals also identified work-life balance as a key indicator of potential to succeed in the role. In their collective opinion, administrators who are consumed by their work or whose identity is defined too much by their professional self are on a short road to burnout. These individuals also tend to plough through or wear out those with whom they work. For this reason Principal Stover makes it a point to tell her assistant principals that if being a principal "is [their] whole life, [they] will burn out in two years." Instead, emphasizing that such a determination has to be made personally, the principals described readiness in this area as a place in life where meeting the substantial demands of the job generally *works within* one's life. Principal DeAngelo shared his view of what this means:

> Of course, the students come first from our professional point of view, but our family, and or our friends and our surrounding of folks who we care for...if we take care of that, then good things are going to happen. Part of [this] is personal wellness and not only emotional, spiritual, or whatever, but also physical wellness. This, physically, is a demanding job and if you can't show u' to work because you're sick, that's a problem. So, I look for that...people who take care of themselves holistically.

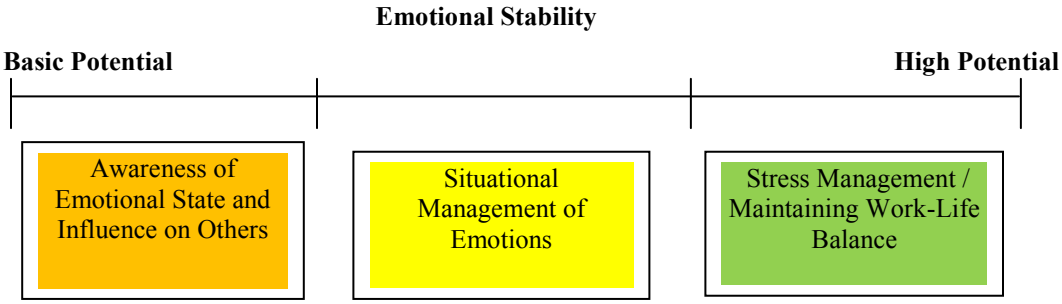
The willingness and ability to maintain this balance is critical because it requires being able to realize and live with comprise. In their view, choosing to be a principal means understanding one cannot "have it all" both professionally and personally. Speaking to the potential impact of dealing with personal issues at home, Principal Lancaster said:

> It only matters if [a] person can't separate their personal from their professional life. I talk to people about that. I say, 'You can't be mad at your husband and take it out on everyone.' If it's affecting you, it doesn't

mean you don't have the potential, it only means that right now is not the best time.

Aspirants to principalship, therefore, must understand this and ideally have clarity about their own situation as they transition into the role.

Table 4.6: Emotional Stability as Levels of Potential



Collectively, the principals described professional capacity and personal disposition as the foundational elements of readiness for the principalship. The locus of the leadership thinking and action in the areas of instructional leadership and organizational management distinguishes raw and developed potential. High potential for the principalship is defined by leadership acts that promote and are closely aligned with the end goals of student achievement and school improvement. Conversely, less-developed leadership potential is characterized by a lack of a big a picture, or systemic, approach that instead focuses narrowly on parts of the whole.

In addition to capacity, certain ways of being define readiness for the principalship. Individuals with the "right stuff" to become principals communicate purposefully to build and strengthen relationships, they self-regulate their actions to

respond as called for by the situation or context, and they control their emotional state for the benefit of others as well as their own productivity and well-being.

How the Principals Assess and Evaluate Potential and Readiness

The previous section outlines the capacities and dispositions the principals considered developmental indicators of readiness for the principalship. In this section, I report the key findings on the second question guiding this study: *how do the principals assess and evaluate readiness in their assistant principals?* The principals unanimously and definitively identified the products and processes they use to measure their assistant principals' developmental readiness for principalship. Their *products* answer to this question was summed up by Principal Stover: "You know by the products they create, if teachers and teams they work with become better, if they get good results, and by the quality of [their] interactions with kids, adults, and families." Although not explicitly defined, Principal Stover's comment also spoke to the *processes* the principals described using to assess their assistant principals' leadership development – real-time performance monitoring of authentic job tasks. The principals went further, however, and described two considerations, *growth* and *leader-context fit*, that they believe must be taken into account when evaluating or making a holistic determination about whether an assistant principal is ready to perform successfully as a principal.

Growth

Growth is a core concept in assessment and evaluation. *Assessment* speaks to the process of determining a level of development or performance while *evaluation* is the process of making a judgment about proficiency based on assessment outcomes. Using the criteria for readiness for the principalship as defined by the informants, *assessment* is a measure of a candidate's professional capacity and personal disposition during the process and product stages described above. The principals agreed that change in performance and developed proficiency or mastery over time should also factor in an evaluative judgment of an assistant principal's potential. They believe that such a body of evidence shows someone is responsive to feedback and adaptable.

Responsiveness to feedback. The principals agreed that potential in the area of responsiveness to feedback depends greatly on an individual's response to criticism. Principal Lancaster spoke to this, recalling assistant principals with whom she worked:

> Some had a hard time taking the criticism or critique and using it without getting defensive about it. While none of us manages conflict perfectly, most are able to reflect and honestly say, 'I/we did this right. I/we didn't do this so well. I'll/we'll do this differently next time.'

The principals acknowledged that receiving criticism is not easy. For example, Principal DeAngelo recalled "being a bit taken aback" and really not wanting "that much feedback" early in his administrative career when his supervisor identified five areas in which he could improve. Those that spoke to this issue acknowledged, however, that it becomes easier to reflect on and use feedback the longer they serve.

Another way the principals talked about feedback concerned how individuals actually used it to grow. The assistant principals who tended to be selective and only hear validation of a perceived strength or reinforcement of an action, typically did to not show much growth over time. The key to growth appeared to be a healthy balance between using feedback to build on strengths, to draw energy from success, and to learn from mistakes. Principal DeAngelo explained:

> [One assistant principal] was handling a tense parent situation and she was able to reflect and point out that it really went well based on some feedback I had given her over the years. Yes, I think that's definitely a key component of readiness –when we see the assistant principals able to self-monitor and correct.

Similar to the proactive disposition of self-regulation discussed earlier, evidence that someone can and will respond to feedback by self-correcting appropriately also matters to success as a school leader.

A third consideration in this area was an individual's dependence on explicit feedback. While the principals agreed it is a good sign when an individual accepts feedback constructively and responds appropriately in action, several went further to point out that the principalship is a lonely position and one rarely gets honest, comprehensive feedback. Teachers are understandably less than forthcoming in their direct feedback to principals because of organizational power dynamics. District administrators tend to be more candid, but their limited familiarity of contextual details or their role-related focus makes their feedback similarly narrow. Therefore, the principals collectively identified the ability to "have your radar up at all times," as Principal

Rutherford described it, as essential to growth. High-potential candidates for principalship with whom they worked tended to be more attuned to their actions and the contextual factors of a situation, not only to self-regulate in the moment and to self-correct strategically, but to actively seek feedback to reflect on their practice, style, and effectiveness proactively. According to Principal Elaissi, just asking "What do you think I could differently next time?" is a sign of high potential. In other words, high-potential candidates work to *adapt* themselves as leaders.

Adaptability. There was perhaps no other topic the principals spoke as strongly about as the importance of *adaptability* to success as a future principal. Principal Zamora summed up this collective position:

> I think that it [adaptability] is crucial. The future principals are facing a world that is so totally different from what we experienced in our careers. I've just seen the profession change so dramatically in the short time that I've done it.

The "change" to which she refers was also frequently raised by the other five informants; it is the culture of reform which has become ingrained of the education landscape over the past decade. The principals talked about how each new reform requires a principal to not only understand what is to be done, but how to implement leadership in order to positively impact student achievement. Principal Stover spoke to this:

> It's easy to get hung up on ideas like standards, curriculum, reform, turnaround, equity, achievement, accountability, etc. and overlook that none of these things mean anything outside of the specific, purposeful interaction between educators, students, families, communities, etc. That is education…that is leadership.

Moreover, the principals said that the co-occurrence of reforms is increasingly more common, compounding the degree of difficulty of leadership. In their view, if for no other reason than to predict adaptability potential, evidence of growth is an essential consideration for evaluating whether a candidate is ready to successfully navigate the demands of a principalship.

The principals also talked about the importance of adaptability in managing the day-to-day demands of running a school. Principal Lancaster talked about the unpredictable nature of balancing leadership and management demands as a principal:

> You gotta' have the adaptability and flexibility piece because you might think, 'I'm gonna' be principal. I'm gonna' do this and that.' And then the roof blows off the building. You know what I mean? You gotta' see that in them – adaptability and flexibility – because there's always something.

Aware of the argument that dealing with management issues like construction and physical plant crises is not consistent with being an instructional leader, a few principals expressed their opinion that separating operational and instructional leadership is something which might make sense in theory but does not play out neatly in real time. They agreed it is better and more efficient for the school and all stakeholders if the principal is integrally involved in both. Principal Stover reflected on her experience of managing a construction project:

> Every day, I would walk to every portable [classroom] and tell everybody what was going on, what was happening, how things were coming along, who was doing what. I talked to people downtown and they would come over to decide about all sorts of things.

While building issues large in scope or scale might seem uncommon, each informant principal noted having to deal with either a whole-school physical plant emergency or a long-term construction project at least once during their current assignments.

The learning and growth orientation these principals associated with adaptability can also be instrumental to leadership. As illustrated through Principal Zamora's description of talking her staff through the ambiguity of a particular reform:

> Being able to communicate to teachers, 'Guys, we're all going to learn about this because there are so many things that come down the pike that we don't know about.' That doesn't mean that we can't learn about it…or that we can't nurture team learning about it and then share it.

This example highlights how an individual's general openness and approach to change can calm anxiety, focus the work of the organization, and promote a culture of collaboration. Each experience also serves as background knowledge for future challenges. Principal Zamora asserted this is evident by performing "successful[ly] in different situations because when you put somebody into a new situation, all the synapses start firing because now they are making connections." According to the informants of this study, assistant principals who used their lived experience as a teacher or administrator to plan or coordinate initiatives based on what worked – or didn't – in past similar contexts displayed the leadership adaptability the principals associated with high potential for principalship.

Leader-Context Fit

By definition, *context* refers to the interrelated conditions under which something occurs. *Fit* speaks to being suited, acceptable, or adaptable for a given purpose. Along these lines, the principals identified two things pertaining to leader-context fit which should be taken into account when evaluating a potential principalship candidate. The first is simple but critical: a well-informed commitment to being a principal and all that the role requires and involves. The second consideration is more complex as it involves a selection or placement decision based on the match between the candidate and the stakeholders at their potential school assignment.

Commitment to the job. Every principal at some point in their interview felt compelled (as if in the interest of providing full disclosure to those who aspire to the position) to speak about how demanding the job is. Describing what commitment to the job is to him, Principal DeAngelo said, "This is a tough job. People ask me about my summers and I say, 'Yeah, I take time off,' but the truth is we work until the job gets done." For this reason, the principals unanimously agreed that it is important to be sure that a candidate who enters into this particular leadership responsibility is fully informed of what will be required and asked of them.

Principal Zamora talked about one of her assistant principals who demonstrated this understanding: "She was very talented but she was clear that she was not interested in [becoming a principal] because it's too big." Thus they advise aspirants to weigh the impact the job would have on their overall quality of life. Principal Stover makes sure

her interns and assistant principals "get a sense of what the job entails while understanding what the implications would be for other priorities they have in life." It is important to note, however, that the principals were not suggesting that there exists a formula to make this calculation. Through their own stories and paths to the principalship, they demonstrated that each individual needs to determine his/her own personal and professional priorities and act accordingly. Several principals, as noted in their profiles, stated that they never aspired to the role or waited until it was the right time in their life to do so.

Commitment to the school's stakeholders. The principals consistently talked about the importance of genuinely wanting to be in the school to which you are applying or are assigned as an administrator. Specifically, they talked about how a school's constituency greatly impacts the principal's day-to-day reality and the leadership challenges associated with each school community. Principal Lancaster captured the essence of what the principals said to this end:

> All schools are hard places. They just are hard in different ways. Even in [the affluent part of town]. They might not have to worry about test scores in those schools, but something makes it hard to be the principal there.

Commenting on the reality she faced for most of her tenure as a principal at schools serving high-minority, high-poverty student populations, Principal Lancaster said, "I would set up interviews and [teacher candidates] would find out where we were, what we were about, and how many kids were on free lunch, and they'd turn the other way." She then recounted an incident where a new assistant principal left on vacation at

the end of one year without remaining in close communication with a teacher who wanted to transfer from another district. This teacher wanted to leave her suburban assignment to work in community like the one in which she grew up because she felt she could make a greater difference there. She was experienced and had a proven track record of promoting student achievement in her content area. In many ways, this teacher was the ideal candidate to fill the vacancy at the school. However, because the assistant principal did not make the teacher aware of routine procedures and timelines in the district, the teacher changed her mind and took a job elsewhere. Because, as Principal Lancaster pointed out, these types of candidates are not "lining up outside the doors" of high-needs schools, the students ultimately suffered because of a leadership failure. Principal Lancaster used the occasion to speak to her assistant principal about the need to prioritize certain leadership responsibilities, such as talent recruitment, and have a sense of urgency about them. The assistant took the guidance to heart and began identifying areas of leadership important to the school where she would focus on being proactive.

The principals also agreed that the administrator selection process presents the ideal opportunity to determine whether someone is genuinely committed to working with a constituency or whether they are driven more by career advancement interests. Principal Zamora spoke to what she looks for during the interview process with assistant principal candidates:

> What I look for in that interview – I keep going back to that initial interview – Is this a person that truly believes that all kids can learn? And what have they done in their past that is a manifestation of that belief?

Principal Stover elaborated on this point by describing the vision and advocacy that leaders at turnaround schools should possess:

> You can get someone that comes in and does what I call a 'drill and kill base' with kids. The students don't get where they need to be. They can pass a test for that year. But this is my question: What's your vision for this? Are we here because we're going to pass tests or because we're creating an environment where kids love to learn, teachers love to come to school, and where children in poverty know the possibilities that they have for their future? That they are able to be accepted into magnet programs in the district if that's what they want to do. That they can compete with high SES kids. One of the things that I'm so proud of is that almost half of our fifth graders apply to magnet programs every year. From no kids. And we had the highest acceptance rate two years ago to go to [the two magnet middle schools in the district]. It became a reality by seeing the big picture and saying, 'What is it that teachers lack?' If you put that vision out, most people are going to like that. No one is going to say, 'I don't want to like that.'

She went on to give credit to a former assistant principal who is now a principal herself for helping to develop this vision into a reality in her school. According to Principal Stover, this assistant principal's vision and commitment stood out even in a casual conversation, further illustrating the potential to determine leader-context fit in the selection process.

Additionally, several of the principals commented at some point during or after their interview that being metacognitive about their experience made them aware that a well-defined evaluation procedure for assistant principals could enhance their district's principal selection process. Principal Rutherford captured the essence of their idea:

> I'm not so sure that they shouldn't involve the principals along the way in assessing their AP [through] a conversation with the associate

> superintendent and the AP and the principal. There really is nothing now except you evaluate your AP on a piece of paper. No one ever asks you anything else about it.

Principal Rutherford and her colleagues believe that this type of regular conversation would not only promote awareness of the internal candidate pool for the principalship, but would also increase the integrity and value of the evaluation process, potentially shifting its focus to capacity development rather than performance evaluation alone.

Summary

According to the principals in this study, assessing readiness for the principalship can be accomplished easily and simply. The success and effectiveness of assistant principals can be measured by the quality of the outcomes they produce in the course of carrying out the duties and responsibilities in supporting the principal. Do they facilitate or complicate things? Do their actions support or hinder effective teaching and student achievement? The sum of the principals' responses suggested that evaluating readiness comprehensively entails more than just knowing these facts. Knowing an individual's history of growth and how well their personal and professional interests align to the demands of the job and the school context should also factor in determining the extent to which a candidate is likely to perform successfully as a principal.

Although growth can be a disposition when referring to a general openness to change, improvement, or learning, the principals each talked about growth differently. As the principals described it, hard evidence of past growth can be thought of as a badge

of character similar to how a medal on a public servant's uniform represents exceptional past service, and suggests that these individuals can be counted on in the future. To be clear, the principals never elevated the substance of character about which they spoke to a level of merit required to earn a medal in public service; however, the metaphor makes the point about the relevance of considering an assistant principal's history of growth as an indicator of potential performance as a principal.

How the Principals Develop Potential and Readiness in their Assistant Principals

In this third section, I report on the major findings which emerged from the interviews in response to this study's third guiding question: *how do the principals develop readiness for the principalship in their assistant principals?* First, clear consensus existed among the principals that structured shared leadership opportunities are most conducive to developing capacity in their assistant principals. Second, while the principals agreed on a common structure, they disagreed about whether building on strengths or targeted areas of weakness is the best approach to grow their protégés.

Before detailing the findings in these two areas however, I believe it is relevant and important to contextualize this discussion by pointing out that the principals consistently talked about how <u>their</u> mentors shaped their approach to working with their own protégés. Principal DeAngelo spoke about the direct impact his mentor had on him:

> I was very fortunate to be under the tutelage of Jack Johnson who was the principal at the time. I was [his] AP for 7 years. I would say he taught me just about everything that I do today. And because of his emphasis on

> developing me as a future principal, I have always taken that very seriously as part of my job as a principal.

Principal Zamora similarly described learning the ropes from the principal under whom she served as an assistant principal. She went further, however, saying she replicated the shared leadership structure that her mentor employed in developing her:

> Do you remember I said I learned a lot because my principal functioned with a framework of co-leadership? She respected me and just conveyed that she had confidence in me. That influenced me, you know, so that's how I learned that.

Others shared similar experiences and sentiments about working with their mentors, shedding light on two interesting findings that emerged about how they work to develop readiness in their assistant principals.

Shared Leadership

When the principals discussed how they develop capacity in their assistant principals, they emphasized the importance of sharing the duties and responsibilities of leading and running the school. They also talked about how they structure and tailor shared leadership opportunities to run the school efficiently and support their assistant principal's development. Principal Rutherford described her approach:

> I usually talk [with them] at the beginning of the year about what experiences they have had and what experiences they haven't had. I think everybody has to do their share of all those little things that take up time – paperwork time. They've got to do LPAC, etc. You've got to get to know it.

This example illustrates how assistant principals help reduce their principal's workload

and benefit from having programmatic coordination responsibilities. Principal Lancaster similarly talked about how she guides and supports her assistant principals' growth through assignments:

> We sit down in the cabinet meetings and we talk about specifics. And I may say, 'I want you do this because I want you know how to….or how to work with…I'll be here with you, but I need you to learn this part.'

There comes a point, however, when a principal must phase out how much s/he directly guides the process. Making this point, Principal Zamora thought aloud, "How are people going to learn to walk if we don't give them the opportunity and convey to them: I hired you. I have confidence in you. I trust your decisions." This point was echoed by Principal Rutherford who believes shared leadership "can promote ownership" of the school in assistant principals if handled properly.

The principals also expressed a common belief that the recruitment and development of future principals includes sharing leadership opportunities with teachers. Principal Lancaster provided an example of reaching out to teachers who have demonstrated an interest in pursuing administration:

> There are some teachers on this campus who have their administrative certificate, and I found out about it. So I was like, 'We need to talk because there are some things that you can do. So if you see something that you want to take on, just let me know. If you want to help out with something, then come and talk to me about it.'

Other principals described a similar approach of inviting teachers to bring leadership to an area of a personal interest or concern. Principal Stover recalled such a situation that allowed her to continue to grow the school during two years when she had an ineffective

assistant principal who she ultimately counseled out of the district:

> I was working on teams – the idea of learning communities without ever studying about them. Well, Elaine and another teacher, John, were going to school; they came back saying, 'You gotta' read this stuff!' So we went to work building teams.

The principals' descriptions of presenting leadership opportunities as optional in this way did not come across as manipulation. Instead, they conveyed a tone of wanting to promote ownership while serving as a gentle nudge of encouragement to effect change or improvement beyond the classroom. Seemingly, they aimed to give their teachers confidence through a shared, yet sheltered, leadership experience.

Build on Strength or Target Weakness

For as much as the principals agreed or expressed similar ideas about what counts as readiness, on the issue of how to assess and evaluate readiness and the role of shared leadership structures to promote it, they could not have disagreed more. Some felt it was best to build capacity around known strengths or weaknesses. Principal Rutherford described how she would capitalize on experiences in which an assistant principal had been successful in order to coach him/her toward improvement in other areas:

> What I would do is more point out when something that they handled, that I thought they handled beautifully, and I would go that way. 'What did you do with that parent who was so angry?' I knew what they did, but I would say, 'Let's talk a little bit about that.' Then we'd compare it to another situation and talk about 'so, what was different between this one and that one?'

For other principals, the emphasis was less about developing capacity and more about

being pragmatic. Principal Stover captured the essence of the utilitarian position expressed by those who spoke in favor of building on strengths as a matter of efficiency:

> You have to work around people's strengths so that if someone comes in and they're horrible at testing, you don't say, 'Learn it.' Instead, you have them work in areas that they're amazing. Yeah, you need to understand what it's about, but don't work at it if it's not important. As a principal, you're going to always be able to find someone that's good at something.

In other words, time and energy are valuable commodities. Instead of expending them trying to master something, an effective administrator should identify someone else in the organization to whom to delegate that leadership responsibility. Although different in principle, both approaches are consistent with self-regulation as discussed earlier in this chapter because both prioritize self-awareness and making decisions accordingly.

The contrasting developmental approach that emphasizes targeting areas of relative weakness for improvement was summed up by Principal Zamora. Directly addressing the argument of growing assistant principals' capacity by focusing only their strengths, she said:

> The whole experience has to be one professional development experience…I've seen some of my colleagues do that [focus on strengths only]. If my AP tells me, 'I'm feeling really uncomfortable about this piece,' I say, 'Ok, so let's get on it' you know?

Neither Principal Zamora nor any of her colleagues who shared her view about the importance of intentional work to improve areas of weakness said that mastery was the goal. They viewed self-improvement effort as an end onto itself and as a productive habit for principals.

As with shared leadership, whether the principals valued building on strengths or targeting weaknesses to grow their assistant principals appeared to be influenced greatly by the approach their mentors used with them. Thus, while their disparate theories of action about how assistant principals realize potential and become ready for the principalship may not shed light on the benefits of one approach over the other, the principals' professional narratives illustrate how leadership development paradigms and practices have gotten transmitted and replicated within this district.

Summary

The principals all talked about developing their assistant principals to become ready for the demands of principalship through a shared leadership structure. The typical approach they described involves an annual conversation with their assistant principal to talk through the experiences and opportunities they had and would like to take on in the upcoming year. While the division of burdensome compliance responsibilities is routine in these conversations, every principal emphasized that another key consideration is the assessed leadership needs of the school.

There was no consensus among the principals about whether it is more effective or productive to develop readiness in assistant principals by building on their strengths or shoring up their weaknesses. The principals who advocated building on strengths also emphasized the importance of distributed leadership. These principals believe that there is always someone in the organization who can be tapped to lead in an area in which a

principal is not strong. In contrast, the principals who spoke in favor of deliberate and intentional work on weaknesses spoke of this approach as a means of developing the habits and resiliency associated with adaptability. They prioritize self-regulation, or self-monitoring, and adjusting to one's environment through a compensatory practice such as delegation.

Although not directly associated with the guiding question discussed in this section, historical precedent emerged as an important finding insomuch as the principals consistently talked about employing the same approach with their assistant principals as did their mentor with them. Of important note, those who worked as assistant principals for principals who had a similar track record of developing and supporting their assistant principals for promotion came to the job with a working leadership development model. The co-leadership approaches they each established and continue to use stem from and align to what they perceived to have helped them become ready for principalship.

Summary of Findings

In this chapter, I reported the findings which emerged from a case study of six veteran principals with a track record of leading successful schools and supporting assistant principals to earn promotion to the principalship. The underlying theory of action guiding this study is that strategic recruitment, development, and selection of assistant principals for the principalship can positively affect the desired outcomes of school achievement, principal effectiveness, and principal retention. Stated differently:

doing a better job at identifying those with the greatest potential to become effective school leaders, developing these individuals strategically, and placing them in assignments where they are primed to succeed will increase the odds of having more successful schools and of retaining principals longer. To this end, this study aimed to understand the informants' perceptions of what readiness for the principalship entails by examining three questions:

1. What counts as potential and readiness for the principalship?
2. How do principals assess or evaluate potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals?
3. How do principals develop potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals?

In the collective opinion of the study's six principal-informants, readiness for principalship is defined by professional capacity and leadership dispositions. The principals pointed out that high-potential assistant principals with whom they consistently worked demonstrated leadership thinking and actions that promoted the end goals of student achievement and school improvement. Candidates with lower potential in these areas, on the other hand, tended to show limited understanding of how to affect school improvement systemically. Their leadership thinking and actions generally focused narrowly on units of the school without consideration of or purpose to the big picture.

On the question of assessing and evaluating readiness in assistant principals, the principals distinguished the two practices as being related but somewhat distinct. They

described readiness assessment as a measurement of potential based on the quality of the outcomes produced in the course of carrying out duties and responsibilities of support their role in supporting the principal. Assessed potential in the key areas of professional capacity and leadership disposition thus inform evaluation, or a holistic determination of readiness, which takes into account two key considerations: 1) knowing about a candidate's history of growth; and, 2) how well a candidate's interests align to the demands of the job and the school they would lead. Belief in the importance of these two considerations stemmed from the principals' work with assistant principals as well as their own professional careers.

What emerged from discussions with the principals about how they develop readiness in their assistant principals is the common use of a shared leadership structure. More than dividing the workload, the principals talked about working with their assistant principals as partners in leading the school. Although the principals were varied in their approach to assigning responsibilities in order to capitalize on areas of strength or to improve areas of relative weakness, they agreed that assistant principals learn best by having the responsibility and opportunity to lead in authentic situations. Finally, they also collectively spoke about how much their own experiences as assistant principals influenced the development of their protégés.

In the next chapter, I discuss how these findings fit within the educational leadership knowledge base and I analyze them in the light of the *Integrated Model of Potential* and *Leader Developmental Readiness* frameworks. Additionally, I consider

how the results of this study can inform policy, practice, and future research. To set the stage for the ensuing discussion, I conclude this chapter with a thought shared by Principal Stover near the end of her interview:

> I can count on one hand the number of times that somebody has told me that I'm responsible for developing assistant principals. Now maybe… maybe…everyone just assumes that's part of the job. But if I was Superintendent, I would make it extremely clear that is an important part of our job and we need to work at it. And unfortunately, at least in some of the districts that I've worked in, the practices of the district don't support that process of growing our own because they keep – whenever there's an opening – hiring somebody else from the outside.

In the opinion of one principal, there is a real need and desire to improve the system by which her district develops and selects school leaders. If her belief is representative of principals elsewhere, then we need to approach this problem systemically.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I outlined the findings from in-depth interviews with six principals in one urban school district in Texas. The findings revealed how those principals define readiness for the principalship, how they assess and evaluate potential and readiness for the principalship, and how they work with their assistant principals to develop readiness for the principalship. The principals see certain professional competence and personal dispositions as indicators of potential and readiness for the principalship. They believe an assistant principal's potential to perform as a principal is evident in the processes and products of their work, but they don't believe all high-potentials are necessarily ready to become principals. Shared leadership was instrumental to developing readiness for the principal in their assistant principals and developing capacity by building on strength and targeting weakness worked equally well in their experience.

In this chapter, I restate the problem this study aims to address and its purpose. I then situate the findings in light of the research knowledge base in educational leadership. Next, I discuss and analyze the findings using the theoretical frameworks on leadership potential and leader developmental readiness that informed this study. I then discuss the potential implications of the findings for the field before concluding with considerations for future research on this topic.

Restatement of the Problem and Purpose

Research has documented the need for school districts to recruit and retain qualified school leaders capable of navigating the organizational challenges of school improvement, particularly in high-poverty, low-achievement contexts. Recently, scholars have studied *principal pipeline* structures implemented by school districts to recruit and retain effective principals. A key finding of this previous research is that clearly-defined standards and performance criteria can inform school districts' strategic identification and development of individuals with the potential to become effective principals. However, further research is needed to understand and define potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals, commonly the largest candidate group in a principal pipeline.

The purpose of this study is to explore principals' perceptions about potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals. Understanding of these phenomena through the lived experience of practicing principals is important because their perceptions are grounded in the contextual realities of what it is to be a principal. They also bring a unique perspective to the discussion about what reveals that an assistant principal has the skill, disposition, and mindset to perform successfully as a principal.

Summary of the Methods

I used a qualitative case study design to investigate principals' perceptions about potential and readiness for the principalship among assistant principals. Six principals in

one urban school in Texas were purposefully selected based on their experience with supporting, developing, and/or endorsing former assistant principals for promotion to the principalship while under their supervision. I collected data through questionnaires and in-depth interviews to understand the informants' lived experience.

Comparing the Findings to the Literature

In Chapter 2 I identified substantive implications – claims, in effect – relevant to this study based on the review of literature. I now examine the extent to which the findings are consistent with those claims.

Potential and Readiness is Characterized by Specific Job Knowledge

The review of the literature established that effective leaders know how to carry out essential job functions as well as manage the routine order of business. In my analysis, I posited that that a candidate for the principalship deemed *ready* to handle the challenge and responsibility of leading a school would at least possess the knowledge and skill necessary for organizational management, instructional supervision, and school improvement.

The findings from this study suggest that basic potential for the principalship depends on the ability to recognize best practice. This is consistent with research that has found that evaluators must be able to distinguish between the different levels of practice in classroom examples (Danielson, 2011). The study also found that more-advanced

candidates have the knowledge and skill to develop *teacher capacity*, a key role that principals play in supporting novice (Brown & Wynn, 2007) and alternatively-certified teachers (Ovando & Casey, 2010), two groups commonly found in low achieving urban schools. Further, this study found that high-potential candidates for the principalship promote student achievement through strategic facilitation of instruction and problem solving, practices found by Morgan, Williams, and Plesec (2011) to build teacher team capacity. However, the findings were inconclusive about the role and importance of content knowledge. One half of the participants felt that content matters to effective instructional leadership (Sherman & McDonald, 2008); in contrast, the other participants argued that facilitative support structures and expectations for performance were at least as important to teacher capacity as principals' content knowledge (Vale, Davies, Weaven, Hooley, Davidson, & Loton, 2010).

This study also found that management skills are an indicator of basic principalship potential. This supports research that suggests that principals' organization management skills consistently predict student achievement growth and other success measures (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Advanced potential in this area is evident through systems thinking and leadership, a finding consistent with Bossi (2007) who maintained:

> The principal must now be able to engage in systems thinking and demonstrate the ability to both understand and guide complex processes of evaluation, change and group development (p. 33).

Certain Characteristics Not Only Describe - But May Predict - Effective Leadership

Cognitive processes such as problem-solving and reflection have consistently been associated with leadership effectiveness and development. Similarly, personality and social skills have been associated with effective leadership. The literature also supports that the ability to learn productively from experience and to adapt to new challenges is important to effective leadership.

This study found that principalship potential is revealed through communication that is facilitative to productivity (Guarino, 1974). Individuals who demonstrate advanced potential use communication to build rapport and relationships, and high-potentials tend to use communication as a means to build or maintain a collaborative school culture focused on improvement (Nidus & Sadder, 2011). Specifically, high-potential candidates *listen*, a skill that at a minimum fosters a culture of respect to others and affords a leader the opportunity to identify problem solving opportunities and solutions. While relative underexplored in the literature, Woods and Shoho (2009) did find a perception gap between teachers and principals in regard to principal listening skills, suggesting that this indicator merits stronger consideration in recruitment and selection processes. This study also found that potential and readiness for the principalship is evident in an individual's ability and willingness to have critical conversations to advocate for social justice (Wasonga, 2009) and to critique teacher performance (Yariv & Coleman, 2005) in the interest of student achievement.

Two additional personal characteristics – self-regulation and emotional stability – were found to be related to potential and readiness for the principalship. Arguing that effective leadership in a culture of change combines intellectual intelligence with emotional intelligence, Fullan (2001) identified these same characteristics as fundamental to emotional intelligence. The discreet skills identified in this study as being associated with self-regulation are *self-awareness* and *self-management*, which promote a leader's ability to act and respond appropriately in the moment and make long-term decisions in the best interest of the organization. This study also finds that emotional stability is evident in the appropriateness and consistency of leader's emotional state as well as his/her response in a crisis situation. An important consideration suggested by the findings of this study to impact a leader's emotional well-being is a healthy work-life balance, an idea supported by research which found that work-life balance and success outcomes are related in the career outcomes of public sector employees (Peterson, 2009).

Context Is an Important Consideration in Determining Potential and Readiness

The literature supports that potential and readiness for the principalship is as much a consideration about the school context as it is about the candidate's assessed development as an educational leader. Context matters because the organizational environment determines the extent to which and how a leader fits the leadership needs of the school.

This study found that leader-context fit is an important consideration in evaluating individual's potential to succeed in a particular principalship assignment. The findings suggest that aspirants should be clear about their commitment to the job and the extent to which being a principal aligns with personal life priorities, an issue associated with principal turnover (Norton, 2003).

Scholars Disagree on the Relationship between Work History and Leadership Effectiveness

The school of thought on one side of the debate is that work history reveals character that transfers to service in any organizational role. The opposing view holds that each assignment is different and other factors, like the ability to learn and adapt, matter more to success in a new role than does past performance. Another perspective on this issue suggests that it's not a question of *if* but *how* work history factors in an individual's leadership development. Research in the area of this third perspective maintains that key developmental experiences can spur growth and leader developmental readiness.

The findings of this study support that growth and adaptability not only factor in potential and readiness for the principal but are related. At the heart of these findings is the idea that an individual can and will change over time to effectively negotiate the challenges of being a leader. The indicators this study finds to be associated with growth are *responsiveness to feedback* and having a *general learning orientation*, behaviors that affect leadership actions and processes (Cain & Gunter, 2012) and act as a guide and a

catalyst for leadership actions (McGough, 2003). Productive processing and responses to feedback in turn promote an individual's ability to adapt to the current and evolving complexities of the job (Fullan, 2004). These dispositions also allow principals to successfully navigate the unpredictable day-to-challenges of school leadership.

Findings Not Examined in the Review of the Literature

Two key findings of this study – the *use of shared leadership* and *developing leadership capacity by building on strengths or targeting weakness* to develop potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals – were not examined in initial the review of the literature. However, an *ex post facto* review of the literature in educational leadership, leadership development and adult learning theory did not identify studies that have been conducted on these or closely related topics. The closest example came from Klar (2012) who found that principal leadership is instrumental to developing consensus for change and capacity through distributed leadership structures.

Discussion of the Findings

What Do the Principals' Professional Stories Tell Us?

As discussed earlier, conducting this study revealed to me that while the *principal developer* concept may have merit, it is not defined by a narrow output measure such as the one I used to recruit participants for this study. Nonetheless, the principals whose voices shaped the findings in this study speak from a wealth experience. In what follows,

I discuss two themes that emerged from the first phase of their in-depth interviews which focused on their professional life histories.

Experience matters. While the paths they took to becoming principals varied, the participants in this study talked about key experiences that shaped their views on school leadership and their views about their own readiness for the principalship. First, they all discussed having observed or worked with effective principals. This experience not only opened their eyes to the impact a principal can have on teachers and students, it also provided them a frame of reference for what an effective school looks like and how it runs. Second, they all became principals at the levels where they worked as assistant principals. Having the opportunity to serve as interim principals allowed two of the participants to succeed their principals upon their departure. Two others were either appointed to or recruited to apply for select principalship opportunities. These examples suggest that the district's familiarity with their work or their reputations - or both - factored in these decisions. One of the remaining two participants had worked in the metropolitan area as a teacher and an assistant principal in schools with a similar demographic constituency as the school where he was selected through a competitive search process. In his case, his experience matched the leader-context fit profile for the job. The sixth participant won the job at the interview. This principal is the participant who did not work with a developer as an assistant principal, suggesting that social capital was equally as important as potential or readiness for the principalship to advancement opportunity in this district at that time.

Contentment and longevity: coincidence or relationship? The participants all entered the principalship fully-informed of the job demands. They talked about knowing and feeling the time was right for them to move into the principalship. The two who succeeded their principals were already serving as the principal at their schools in many ways, so it was a matter of continuing in the role for them. The two who were invited to apply or assigned to particular schools also felt they could do the job and similarly had the confidence of their principals. The fifth and sixth participants had applied and interviewed for principal positions for over a year, so they clearly were comfortable with their decision to take the job when their opportunities came.

The principals also conveyed a healthy satisfaction with the job and their assignments. Half are at the same school where they entered the principalship, one is in an assignment she requested as a reward for good service to the district, and the two others expressed that they are so happy in their current schools, they would like to stay until retirement. Simply put, they like where they are professionally and it struck me that they likely have been quite happy in this way for much - if not all - of their careers, leading one to wonder whether their contentment is a factor or product of their career longevity. If there is a link, then the considerations they raised may not only inform readiness but also may predict durability.

What Do the Principals' Definitions of Potential and Readiness Tell Us?

This study found that professional capacity and personal disposition are the foundational elements of principalship readiness. The focus of leadership thinking and action in the areas of instructional leadership and organizational management distinguishes raw and developed potential. *High potential* for the principalship is defined by leadership acts that promote and are closely aligned with the end goals of student achievement and school improvement. Less-developed leadership potential focuses narrowly on problems or parts of the organization in isolation, lacking a systemic perspective.

With regard to disposition, the principals described readiness for the principalship as a way of being. Individuals who demonstrate readiness to become principals communicate purposefully to build and strengthen relationships. They self-regulate their actions to respond as called for by the situation or context, and they control their emotional state for the benefit of others as well as their own productivity and well-being.

Focus on systems and students. The principals said evidence of readiness entails a direct focus on student achievement and a systems approach to organizational management. This is consistent with research that has found that competence in organizational management is important to influencing change, improvement, and achievement (Bossi, 2007; Grissom & Loeb, 2011) because it complements instructional leadership thinking and action by aligning the structures and resources necessary to make them happen. For example, if a principal realizes that data from classroom observations

suggests that teachers' different understandings or explanations of a core concept is causing disparate student achievement on assessments, s/he would have to decide about how best to remediate the issue. One response might be to take up the issue with the teachers at the next team or department meeting; this would certainly be appropriate, but also narrow in focus. Someone with a systems perspective would use the data incident as a cue to ask to more questions about where else similar inconsistencies are occurring on this team or throughout the school. They also might reflect on how the planning or communication structures in place affect or contribute to this issue. Most importantly, they would think about how to address this issue and others like it throughout the entire school in an organized and purposeful manner, ideally preventing their occurrence rather than waiting to address them as they surface. Systems thinkers provide the response and support necessary to help the school meet students' needs appropriately through self-sustaining structures.

Mindfulness and selflessness are virtues. While it might seem like hyperbole to describe school leadership traits as "virtues," I simply mean they are practical habits or attitudes that serve principals well (*OED Online*, 2011). What stood out early and consistently in the interviews was how the principals described *mindfulness*, or intentional self-awareness, as essential to performing effectively as a principal. Before assuming the role of principal, being *mindful* would mean thinking through whether one is genuinely committed to the job. It also can help one to decide whether a school is a good fit and vice versa. Mindfulness also helps one be present and manage the moment

productively (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). At minimum, mindfulness prevents one from saying or doing something detrimental to the greater good of the organization. At best, one is creating or maximizing opportunities to maintain, grow, or strengthen the organization in some way. Finally, mindfulness is important because it can help a candidate learn from experience and modify his/her actions accordingly in the future.

In addition to mindfulness, the principals also described *selflessness* as being important to success in the role. Simply put, evidence of readiness in this area means understanding through thought and action that being a principal is not all about "you." You can be essential and instrumental to student achievement and school success, but you also can be an impediment. Potential in this area is demonstrated by one's ability and willingness to act appropriately as the situation requires for the common good. However, it is worth clarifying that complete selflessness is unrealistic and would be unhealthy. Instead, readiness is demonstrated by the ability to effectively balance actions in accordance with self-interest and common good, consistent with the moral orientation defined in the servant leadership literature. McCuddy and Calvin (2008) describe this balance as *self-fullness* - the compromise between selfishness and selflessness.

What Do the Principals' Descriptions of Assessing and Evaluating Readiness for the Principalship Tell Us?

This study finds that potential for the principalship is evident by the quality of the outcomes assistant principals produce in the course of carrying out their everyday duties

and responsibilities. Importantly, however, this study also finds that readiness for the principalship entails more than assessment of potential in the areas of professional capacity and personal disposition; an individual's adaptability and his/her fitness for the assignment should also be considered. This is consistent with the argument in the leadership literature that past job performance is a reliable predictor of future performance in a new role (Silzer & Church, 2009). It is also consistent with the point that Silzer and Church made when they argued that the appropriate question to ask concerning leadership potential should be: *potential for what?* Out of context, assessed performance is just data. It's not really *potential* until you consider the situation in which the knowledge, skills, and dispositions will be applied. Beyond potential, a full evaluation of readiness goes even further, taking into account other variables, or considerations, such as commitment to the job, the school, and the school community.

Readiness is more than just talent and being next in the queue. One of the findings from this study concerns the difference between *assessing* and *evaluating* talent. The former is a measurement of an individual's talent or potential; the latter is a holistic determination about an individual's anticipated performance, given his/her assessed talents, in a particular context. While this is not new information, I believe there are two points worth emphasizing about how these processes play out in the real world.

First, aspirants to the principalship obviously want to make themselves marketable and competitive for positions when they become available. For many, the primary objective is landing a principalship; but how much thought do most applicants

give to the school context? When I first applied for a principalship, every school looked like a great opportunity, and I felt confident that I could do a great job leading any of them. By the time I sought my second assignment five years later, I was much more selective. In my first assignment, I learned which challenges I was better at navigating and what I enjoyed about my school community, so I narrowed my search based on where I believed I could be successful and make a greater impact. In the context of the findings from this study, the second time around I was more self-aware of both my potential and the school contexts in which I fit as a leader. A principal pipeline structure can at least raise awareness of these considerations to everyone along the continuum from aspirant to high-potential.

From the district's perspective, there is pressure to facilitate a fair search process and provide each school community with the best candidates possible from which to select their next principal. A system in which talent is identified without consideration of readiness might work to fill vacancies with talent, but it might also contribute to the high principal turnover rate and the need for capable leaders, not just qualified applicants. Districts maximizing the potential of a pipeline structure would mean, if nothing else, resisting the urge to tap the next *high-potential* in the talent pool queue for the next vacancy. To be clear, I am not suggesting creating a system of tracking candidates to certain positions and denying them access to others; choice must remain a function of the process. Instead, I believe informed choice and strategic recruitment of high-potentials could improve success for all stakeholders.

Wanting to work in a community and with its constituents is underrated. As I acknowledged in the findings, it's hard to know whether the principals succeeded and enjoyed longevity because of their contentment, or if their contentment was a factor in their success and longevity. Either way, I believe the issue is worth raising for the purpose of discussion and further study.

The principals' life stories suggest that there is something to enjoying and/or wanting to be at your school. The challenge for aspirants is to resist the urge to take the first opportunity and instead have the exposure to information and the opportunity to reflect on this before making a decision about their first assignment.

What Do the Principals' Descriptions of Developing their APs Tell Us?

The principals all talked about developing their assistant principals to become ready for the demands of the principalship through a shared leadership structure. However, there was no consensus among the principals about whether it is more effective or productive to develop readiness in assistant principals by building on their strengths or shoring up their weaknesses. These findings serve as the basis for two observations I discuss below.

Sheltered leadership structures pay dividends. The principals discussed using shared leadership structures for the practical purpose of dividing the responsibilities of running and leading a school. What was apparent is that they created safe spaces for their assistant principals to learn their jobs and develop readiness for the principalship. By

sharing the essential responsibilities of running and leading a school, the assistant principals learned the nuts and bolts of operations. They also developed a confidence to do the job. What could be easily overlooked is the importance of the *quality* of the contextual experience. The principals made it sound easy: share the work and the assistant principals will grow. They are all effective principals and run good schools, and there are a lot of good things operating - even institutionalized - in their schools which are not "givens." Not only is there a lot more to learn in such effective settings, but learning is a great deal easier because systems are in place, norms are established, and an effective leader is at the helm. School districts can capitalize on their investment in talent development by carefully selecting the individuals and the contexts to which those in the pipeline will be exposed during their development and induction periods.

Development values and habits may get passed down. Is it coincidence that the principals in this study who also worked for a *principal developer* happened to talk about their work with assistant principals differently than the one principal who did not? Because of the small sample size, it's impossible to determine whether this shows a causal relationship. The findings nonetheless suggest that working for a developer may provide a frame of reference for a way to work with assistant principals. The participants seemed to have replicated the leadership development approach from their own experience as assistant principals. For some, working with a principal developer may have had a deeper impact than simply affecting their practice. They seem to have

adopted the development of assistant principals as part of their view of what a principal - a good principal - does.

Readiness and Potential: The Intersection of Two Frameworks

The Leader Developmental Readiness (LDR) framework (Avolio & Hannah, 2008, 2009) consists of five component factors: learning goal orientation, self-efficacy, self-concept clarity, self-complexity, and metacognitive ability. The main idea behind this framework is that the extent to which an individual realizes his/her leadership potential depends on their ability, willingness, and openness to learn and grow. In theory, individuals in whom the framework's traits are developed are more likely to benefit from structured development opportunities and demonstrate a faster rate of growth than do individuals who do not possess these traits. In this study, the developmental readiness concept served as the conceptual basis for the criteria one might find associated with assistant principals who possess high potential to perform successfully as future principals.

The Integrated Model of Potential (IMP) framework (Silzer & Church, 2009) consists of seven essential components: cognition, personality, learning, motivation, leadership, performance, and knowledge/values. These components are further classified into three broader dimensions: the *foundational dimension* is comprised of cognition and personality; the *growth dimension* is characterized by an individual's motivation and assessed ability to learn; and, the *career dimension* is comprised of leadership, job

knowledge, and job performance. Similar to the LDR framework, the thinking behind the IMP is that certain indicators reveal an individual's likelihood for success in a leadership role, so I similarly anticipated a connection between the IMP elements and my findings.

In the early stages of designing this study, despite knowing better from experience, I thought about *potential* and *readiness* as distinct concepts. Having completed the study and reflected on the meaning of the findings, I understand I was shortsighted in thinking that my findings would align more to either framework. My epiphany occurred during the iterative process of analysis. While completing the third round of coding where I used the elements of each framework as focus codes, I revisited my notes several times to distinguish between similar components in each framework such as Learning Goal Orientation (LDR) and Learning (IMP). I ultimately came to the conclusion that the two concepts and related frameworks were actually complementary. Together they describe four qualities associated with readiness for the principalship in assistant principals as discussed below.

Character

A person's *character* is made up of the features and attributes that define who they are. *Personality* and *leadership*, both IMP components, are two qualities this study finds to reveal leadership potential. The elements of personality associated with principal readiness were communication skills, emotional stability, and adaptability. The principals said these things are important because they help build relationships, maintain calm

during stressful times, and deal with change. The aspects of leadership related to character which surfaced concerned the tendency to connect with others and to advocate in favor of issues of social justice or equity. "Character counts," if you will, because who one is at his/her core drives and reveals oneself in his/her actions and body of work.

Experience

In the context of whether someone is qualified for a job, *experience* typically refers to years of service. In this study, experience concerned the events individuals have lived through in their professional careers. *Self-complexity*, an LDR component, and *performance*, an IMP element, speak to how experience matters to leadership potential and readiness for the principalship. First, *self-complexity* refers to an individual's banked knowledge and experience. Richer knowledge and more varied experience provide the individual with a larger collection of tools, or frames of reference, to apply to new experiences. Perhaps the best example of this from this study is how the principals who worked for a principal developer talked about and approached their work with their own assistant principals so differently than did the one principal who did not have a similar experience. Experience seems to shape perspective and beliefs about what is possible and important, from which action can follow.

Performance refers to the track record in doing one's job. This relates to the assessment of potential and readiness as described by the principals in this study. The participants said potential is evident in the everyday products of the assistant principals'

work. Do they facilitate things, or create fires for the principal to put out? Are things in the school better as a result of their work, or is their involvement a liability? Can they stand on their own, especially when facing adversity or unfamiliar challenge, or is their efficacy dependent upon direction and feedback from others? It is important to clarify that performance does not only concern outcomes, but also *how* the job gets done. Individuals who are ready for the challenge of becoming a principal not only are *productive*, they are *constructive* by developing individual and organizational capacity through the work.

Learning

As discussed previously, it was during the analysis process that I realized that the IMP and LDR frameworks are complementary to one another and actually overlap conceptually to some extent. Where they are identical is in their inclusion of *learning* as key to leadership potential. In the LDR framework, *learning goal orientation* is defined as the tendency to use experience and feedback to grow or improve performance in the future. The principals spoke to this in their descriptions about the importance of self-regulation and a reliance and responsiveness to external feedback. They said the assistant principals with the potential to become principals took feedback well and used it productively. Individuals who demonstrated readiness for the principalship went further and sought feedback from their environment and everyday actions, self-monitoring and self-adjusting proactively instead of waiting for feedback to be given to them formally.

This proactive orientation also relates to the systemic approach to planning and problem solving the principals identified as an organizational management capacity for the principalship.

In the IMP framework, *learning* was similarly defined but it specifically mentioned *adaptability*, a quality the principals felt was essential for success in the job today, but especially so in the future. In fact, this study finds that evidence of learning or growth in the past is the key indicator that a candidate for the principalship is adaptable, indicating a connection to character - it's not just the ability to adapt that matters, it's also having the humility to be open and willing to change, and this distinguishes potential from readiness in this area.

Thinking

One theme resonated throughout the findings from this study: potential and readiness for the principalship depend a great deal on the way an assistant principal *thinks* about the job, moving the work in his/her school, and his/her own pursuit of effective performance. Both the LDR and IMP frameworks similarly emphasize thinking. What follows is a discussion of their components in this area and how they relate to the findings from this study.

Metacognition (LDR) is awareness of one's thought process during experiences and the interpretation of these experiences. Figuratively speaking, metacognition is the lens through we see and make sense of our daily lives. According to Avolio and Hannah

(2009), effective leaders are not only attentive to their environment but they also engage in an ongoing conversation with themselves about what their experiences mean and whether they are valuable to understanding the past or have implications for the future. In this study, the principals talked about metacognition as self-regulation and adaptability. Self–regulation speaks to the in-the-moment self-monitoring and self-correction that requires the awareness of the thinking process and decision-making rationale that metacognition entails. Adaptability, as defined by the principals, is consistent with the ongoing conversation an individual has about his/her development as a leader in order to deliberately act differently or grow him/herself in a way that is consistent with his/her goals. In this study, the principals referred to occasions when action in the best interest of the organization means stepping aside to allow others to bring leadership to the situation or issue. Awareness of one's thinking is instrumental to this end.

Cognition (IMP) refers to strategic thinking and intellect. It is characterized by purposeful processing and reflection, or thoughtfulness. In this case, cognition explains the role and importance of emotional stability in performing successfully as a principal. The principals said that high-potential candidates realize that their emotional state affects others around them. Certainly, everyone is human and will likely experience a bad moment when they don't respond well to something. The point, though, is that high-potential candidates are mindful about situations and the outcomes of their actions in previous similar situations and they proactively prepare, through processing and reflection on past events, to respond productively in the future.

Motivation (IMP) speaks to an individual's drive, energy, aspiration, and organizational commitment. In this study, motivation surfaced in the findings on leader-context fit. First and foremost, the principals emphasized that aspirants to the job should make an informed decision about whether to pursue the principalship because of time demands and personal life implications. They also stressed the need to give consideration to the school community one would be leading and serving. If a candidate does not want to work with a certain population nor deal with certain issues, it's better for all stakeholders if s/he waits for another opportunity. Simply put, if one's heart is fully into being right here, it will show, and it will set the tone for the culture of the school served.

Self-concept clarity (LDR) concerns how individuals define themselves and the extent to which they engage in adaptive and productive reflection. Individuals whose perception of self is accurate and who use feedback as an opportunity to grow themselves productively are more likely to realize their potential as leaders than those whose self-concept is not aligned to reality or who only use feedback to validate valued aspects of themselves. Unlike cognition, which tends to be about situational thinking and reflection, *self-concept clarity* speaks to the healthiness of one's self-image. The finding from this study to which this closely relates is the idea that selflessness is a virtue to performing effectively as a principal. As discussed previously, the realistic and healthy compromise between complete selfishness and selflessness is balanced thinking and action for self-interest and the common good. An individual who has all the answers and only sees others as the problem is not likely to succeed as a principal. According to the principals

in this study, an effective principal is both secure enough in his/her own abilities and willing and able to adapt and grow as a leader according the needs and best interest of the school.

An interesting finding from this study is how *self-efficacy* (LDR) was discussed by the principals. Self-efficacy is the confidence to develop a specific ability or skill for a particular context or leadership role. For the most part, it went virtually unmentioned by the informant principal; it only surfaced in a few principals' accounts of working with assistant principals who possessed too much confidence in their current and future abilities. Three principals talked about assistant principals who were anomalies in their careers because they didn't work well together and they did not support those individuals for promotion. In fact, in every case, the principals either counseled these individuals out of the district or out of being an administrator. Reflecting now on their responses, I see that these assistant principals seemed to also possess an unhealthy orientation in two other areas - motivation and self-concept clarity - because the principals described them generally as having a sense of entitlement and know-it-all attitudes. These non-examples aside, my experience supports that self-efficacy likely didn't come up in the interviews because those who aspire to be principals don't lack for confidence. They typically have succeeded as teachers and emerged as leaders at work, at home, or in the community. In my opinion, what distinguishes potential from readiness in this area is confidence based on resilience, a point the principals made when they talked about past growth as evidence of adaptability.

There was one principal's narrative that countered the majority, however. The one principal who did not work under a principal developer expressed that her belief in herself and her confidence in her potential to be an effective principal was the single greatest factor in her success. This suggests that self-efficacy matters more in situations where individuals do not benefit from systemic support, mentoring, or social capital. In this principal's case, her steadfast confidence was a manifestation of resilience as well as a source of motivation. This is important to the discussion of the principal pipeline structures because not every assistant principal in the candidate pool will have worked for a principal developer as did the majority of the participants in this study.

Limitations and Rival Explanations

As discussed in Chapter 3, one of the measures taken to promote trustworthiness of this study was to consider alternative explanations for the findings that emerged as a result of the measures taken and processes employed to conduct the study. What follows is a discussion of the limitations and rival explanations that potentially threaten the credibility of my findings.

Sample

As discussed on Chapter 3, purposeful sampling was used to select participants. However, because recruitment occurred very late in the school year, convenience also likely factored in shaping the final sample since I was asking principals to sit down for up

to three hours of interviews during the last two weeks of their contract year - a time when many travel to conferences, attend professional meetings, or work from home. As a result, the participant sample was small (6) and comprised of twice as many elementary principals (4) as middle school principals (2). No high school principals participated in the study. As a result, my findings may only be representative of the participants' perceptions, not necessarily those of the collective body of principals in this district or of those who met the selection criteria to participate. Additionally, the small sample may have precluded my ability to discover any differences that might exist between school levels.

Countering these limitations is the substance of the interviews. As noted in the findings, there were points on which the participants agreed and disagreed. The findings emerged from a pattern of independent responses, each expressed differently but consistent in content or meaning. While it certainly is possible that this group of principals is different than their peer group in this district, it is just as likely that their perceptions are similar, if not aligned, with those of their colleagues. The findings themselves also support the credibility of the participants because they are consistent with existing research and are reasonable at face value.

Social Capital

Whether the principals actually developed their assistant principals who were promoted to the principalship during their time working together (and whether their

protégés perceived being prepared to perform successfully as principals) is a good question that this study did not answer. As discussed in Chapter 3, an effort was made to obtain the opinion of at least one protégé of each participant about whether they agreed that their mentor fit the principal developer profile used for selection, but only one protégé responded. Thus, I don't know for sure whether the protégés' promotions came as a result of being developed and ready, by coincidence, or whether they benefited from social capital by association with the schools in which they worked as an assistant principal or with their mentors. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the findings support that the four participants who worked for developers in the district did receive different opportunities for their first principalship than did the two who were *outsiders* in this regard.

That social capital can play a factor in which assistant principals get promoted further makes my point about the need to assess and evaluate potential and readiness for the principalship systemically. School districts with principal pipelines can reduce social capital inflation through regular monitoring and by evaluating potential based on locally-defined performance standards.

Researcher Bias

Because the researcher is an instrument in the qualitative research process, I acknowledge that I may have influenced the outcomes in three particular ways. First, as a developing scholar, I very well could have missed opportunities in the data collection

process that experience will teach me to explore in the moment. Additionally, I understand that my relative inexperience in analyzing large amounts of data may have limited my ability to identify patterns of meaning or themes therein. Both of these are errors of omission, suggesting there was to more to find and report in this study related to readiness for the principalship.

Second, as a former principal in the district where the study was conducted and as someone familiar to the participants, it is not unreasonable to question whether they may have told me what they thought I wanted to hear. They also may not have been candid or forthcoming in their responses because of our familiarity. Frankly, there is no way to be certain either way. Future research on this topic can verify or refute the findings as well as permit things that went unsaid to surface.

Finally, as a former principal with my own ideas about potential and readiness for the principalship, I may have prioritized responses or data that aligned with my views. As discussed in Chapter 3, I implemented procedures to guard against my influence during the data collection and analysis phases. In fulfillment of these procedures, I present the table in Appendix F to compare my responses to the responses of the participants. While my responses to the research questions in this study parallel and overlap this study's findings to some extent, it is evident that my thoughts differed substantially in some areas. For example, from my own experience, I do not believe the principal necessarily has to be strong in instructional leadership because I believe strongly in tapping and utilizing the expertise in the building to move the work in a

distributed leadership model. The principals who informed this study disagreed. They consistently argued that instructional leadership is essential to performing successfully in the role. Another example of how we differed in our views stems from an apparent area of agreement. We both agreed that learning is an indicator of potential, but we didn't talk about it the same way. I spoke to it from the perspective that the principalship is a lonely position and one must actively seek growth opportunities if they are going to remain current. While this might sound similar to the principal's point about adaptability, it is simply not accurate. I realized while conducting the study that the principals have lived through more reforms and changes to the role than I ever experienced during my tenure. In other words, adaptability didn't even occur to me as being important because I didn't experience the amount of concurrent change as they have. Moreover, as described in the findings, their vantage point tells them that adaptability is going to be even more important to new principals than it has been for them. Thus, while the essence of our thinking about what reveals potential and readiness for the principalship was comparable, my responses perhaps aligned narrowly to my own experience where the findings represented their collective voice. Finally, admittedly, my principalship experience is outdated compared to theirs. Conducting this study helped me think about and understand potential and readiness for the principalship more robustly than I did based on my own experience.

Implications

State Policy

The question of whether developing assistant principals should become policy was part of the last phase of the in-depth interview process during which the participants reflected on their professional life histories and their experiences in working with assistant principals to make meaning of potential and readiness for the principalship. Although the research questions guiding this study did not focus on the issue of policy, their response to this question were so consistent and clear I feel compelled to include their perspective in this discussion.

The principals strongly iterated that they see assistant principal development as a local quality improvement strategy, not a state-level policy issue. In their view, policies that begin with the intent of improving schools in Texas ultimately become part of the reform and accountability landscape. In other words, mandating assistant principal development to be part of principal evaluation, for example, would be counterproductive for at least three reasons:

First, not every principal is good at growing their assistant principals. For others, even if they have the ability, it is not a priority. Making it mandatory might do more harm than good for assistant principals working in schools run by either of types of principals. Second, policy solutions in Texas often result in standardization. The point here is that standardization goes against the developmental nature of leadership development. Putting everyone through the exact same experiences wouldn't produce

identical outcomes. Growing assistant principals is and should remain a more personalized endeavor. Finally, the principals' argued that the goal should be developing quality not quantity. This once again makes the point about the nature of the leadership problem at hand. We already have enough people certified to become principals; what we need are more candidates prepared for and capable to perform effectively in the role. This means, the principals argued, that assistant principal development is a better fit as a district-level policy issue.

While I agree that the premise of the principals' argument that assistant principal development is better addressed at the local level as a quality improvement issue, I disagree that there is no place for state policy in addressing this issue. State governments have played a key role in education reform by establishing opportunities and standards for specialized educator certification in critical areas of need. States could similarly establish a credential or endorsement for principals, distinguishing them as a *developer*, or a training principal. With such a structure in place, school districts would have the legal grounds to compensate principals differently, a possible recruitment or retention incentive.

Another state-level policy opportunity exists in the area of strategic compensation. Currently, performance incentives are primarily based on student achievement on standardized tests. Modifying the strategic compensation paradigm to include incentives based on sustainability metrics, such as contributions to the local leadership pipeline, would reward actions promoting systemic change and improvement.

In essence, the paradigm shift would go from prioritizing short-term outcomes to appreciating long-term and wide-scale impact. With the data infrastructure capacity that exists in states like in Texas, this type of impact analysis is not only feasible, it would be relatively simple.

District Policy

The findings from this study suggest that certain district-level policies could promote principal readiness development in assistant principals. First, districts can make periodic conversations between the assistant principal, the principal, and a district-level administrator part of the annual performance review process. These conversations could serve as formative assessment and feedback opportunities for the assistant principal and the district would benefit from getting to know their internal candidate pool for principal vacancies. If done well, this practice not only could inform decision making about candidate development and promotion, but also simultaneously serve to retain talent by establishing and maintaining personal relationships with them.

Another potential local policy could be to identify a short list of high-potential candidates deemed ready for select assignments. The district would need not guarantee a job to these high-potentials, but rather let them know that they would be invited to apply for principal vacancies that match their interests and assessed potential. Such a practice would increase the quality of the candidate pool for each search and also potentially retain high-potentials because knowing their place in the queue, so to speak, might

encourage them to not apply for vacancies in other districts. Additionally, if these candidates, as well as all individuals in the pipeline, wanted to be considered for a wider range of assignments, the formative development conversations described above could inform their professional development decisions, thereby giving them control over their own professional trajectories.

A third local policy idea stems from the life histories of two principals. Identified high-potential assistant principals could serve as interim principals in the district when principals retire mid-year or take temporary leaves of absence. This would not only allow the high-potential candidate to gain authentic experience, it would provide them a realistic feel for the job in order to gauge their commitment and comfort with it. From the district's perspective, it could see how the candidate performs in a specific context to know whether they are indeed a good fit for such an assignment and whether the high-potential assistant principal needs targeted support or intervention to succeed in a similar context in the future. To ensure the school from which the assistant principal is transferred is properly staffed, an administrative intern could be tapped to assume his/her position. This is not only viable because of the established principal and assistant principal intern structures, such the one in this case study, it would be an effective use of the district's talent resources.

Practice

My argument for investigating principals' perceptions about potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals was based on the idea that practical experience is expertise (McCall, 1994). If the participants' lived experience as *developers* made them credible experts to inform this study, then the findings from this study could have relevant application to the field. Even though findings are not generalizable to populations beyond the boundaries of this case, they can inform the development of *propositions* (Yin, 2009) which are ideas offered for consideration or acceptance. What follows, therefore, are propositions about developing potential and readiness for the principalship based on the findings from this study.

First, the findings suggest that principals should give thought to their use and development of their assistant principals. Engaging assistant principals as partners in the leadership and management of the school seems to promote productivity in the short term as well as build individual and organizational capacity over the long term. Principals can examine how they are utilizing their assistant principals, whether they are assigning them a balance and variety of management and leadership responsibilities, and whether they are providing them personal growth opportunities to become an effective principal in the future.

Additionally, principals can share their perspective about the personal and professional implications of being a principal. This information could inform assistant principals' understanding of what the job entails and guide their decision making process

in seeking promotion to the principalship. They could also share advice about the type of school context(s) which they believe would be a good fit for the assistant principals' assessed potential.

The findings also suggest that assistant principals should be mindful of their own development of potential and readiness for the principalship. Two key indicators of potential identified in this study are accurate self-awareness and the ability to have critical conversations. Doing thoughtful "mirror work" would be a good starting place for individuals who aspire to the principalship. Assistant principals can begin by asking themselves and others about their leadership development and performance in support of the school and principal. They can request assignments that will help them develop the knowledge and skill to effectively operate a school. They can examine the extent to which they have the ability and consistent tendency to focus on student achievement and systems in their role as school leaders. They can seek feedback about how to improve and work on incorporating this feedback constructively to demonstrate growth and the ability to adapt as called for the situation in which they lead.

Teacher leaders, a group included in some principal pipeline structures, can similarly engage in self-reflection and analysis about their career aspirations. Like assistant principals, they could benefit by taking stock of their development and perceived potential as a school leader. Teacher leaders who aspire to become principals could also use the findings from this study to be selective about their first assignment as assistant principals. They could seek opportunities to work with a developer or at least

inquire about how the principal envisions utilizing them and providing them growth opportunities.

Theory

Given that this was an exploratory case study, neither the design nor the methods employed aimed to explain a phenomenon or build theory. However, the findings from this study can potentially inform future research which can explain the factors and processes associated with developing assistant principals to perform effectively as principals. Using the findings from this study on instructional leadership as an example, further understanding is needed about what influences or explains an individual's actualization of potential to progress from the basic level of identifying effective instructional practice to the ultimately being able to affect organizational improvement.

Recommendations for Further Study

The recommendations for future studies of readiness for the principalship build on the findings from this exploratory case study and extend from the limitations and rival explanations discussed above. Beginning with the sample, future studies should aim to recruit participants with more robust criteria than was used for recruitment in this study. Ideally, a larger sample that includes principals working at all school levels could allow for comparative analyses and possibly reveal issues that did not surface in this study.

Further study of the role of social capital as a factor of assistant principals' attainment of the principalship would not only help explain outcomes, it could inform school district's improvement planning and selection procedures. Considering the influence of existing recruitment and development structures on candidate opportunity might be telling. A study on the career paths of internal candidates selected as new principals in a given year would be another way to examine this issue.

Exploring the perceptions of other stakeholder groups could validate, refute, or explain the findings from this study. Two groups in particular come to mind: current and former assistant principals, and other key administrators, such as human resource directors and superintendents. These perspectives would also be helpful to understanding potential and readiness for the principalship.

Assuming the findings from this study have merit, further study about the extent to which the various indicators identified by the principals are related to performance outcomes among assistant principals once they become principals should be conducted. Exploring whether certain indicators explain outcomes in certain contexts would be particularly valuable knowledge.

Potential research bias for the same reasons operating in this study most likely will not be an issue in future studies. In the rare circumstance that it would occur, I recommend implementing the measures described in this study to monitor my influence on the process and outcome as they helped me maintain a heightened sensitivity to the ways that I might substitute my views for the collective voice of the informants.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant Consent Form

IRB USE ONLY
Study Number: 2012-03-0016
Approval Date: 05/04/2012
Expires: 05/03/2013

Consent for Participation in Research

Title: Exploring Readiness for the Principal among Assistant Principals

Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will answer any of your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your consent.

Purpose of the Study

You have been asked to participate in a research study about how principals know when an assistant principal is ready to perform successfully as a principal. The purpose of this study is to investigate the following research questions:

1. What criteria do principals use to determine whether an assistant principal is ready for the principalship?
2. How do principals assess or evaluate readiness for the principalship in their assistant principals?
3. How do principals develop readiness for the principalship in their assistant principals?

This study is NOT an evaluation of your individual performance and the resulting data will not used by the researcher or district in that manner.

What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you:

- Will complete a questionnaire about your background and asked opinions of the principalship (up to 5 minutes)
- Will participate in one audio-recorded focus group with up to nine other principals (up to 1 ½ hours)
- May participate in a series of three one-on-one, audio-recorded interviews (up to 3 ½ hours total).

What are the risks involved in this study?

The primary risk stemming from study is the loss of confidentiality of participant responses. Participants who are critical of their school, district, or their colleagues would incur the greatest risk, which may result in potentially deleterious professional consequences. Therefore, the investigator will maintain vigorous efforts to maintain confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of the data.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

There will be no direct benefits towards the participants in the study. The possible benefits of participation are the Austin I.S.D. and the field of education will gain knowledge about potential and readiness for the principalship among assistant principals, which can inform principal recruitment, development and selection processes.

Do you have to participate?

No, your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at all or, if you start the study, you may withdraw at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas at Austin (University) or Austin Independent School District in any way.

Will there be any compensation?

You will not receive any type of payment for participating in this study.

What are my confidentiality or privacy protections when participating in this research study?

This study is confidential. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms in the transcription and coding processes to preserve their confidentiality. The district will not know if you agree or do not agree to participate.

NOTE: If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded during the focus group and individual interviews. Any audio recordings will be stored securely in a locked cabinet and only the research team will have access to the recordings. The recordings will be labeled using code names. Recordings will be kept until the transcriptions have been completed and then erased. The data resulting from your participation may be used for future research or be made available to other researchers for research purposes not detailed within this consent form.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?

Prior, during or after your participation you can contact**:**

Richard M. Gonzales
Phone: 512-659-4366
E-mail: rmgonzales@utexas.edu

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University Institutional Review Board and the study number is **2012-03-0016.**

Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?

For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Participation

If you agree to participate, please complete the **Signature** section below and turn it in at the focus group session.

Signature

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

_____
Printed Name

_____ _____
Signature Date

_____ _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

_____ _____
Signature of Investigator Date

Appendix B: Participant Questionnaire

Name: _____ School: _____
Years in Education: ____ Years as a Principal: ____ Years at Current School: ___

How many of your former assistant principals have been promoted to the principalship? ____

How many of these individuals were working for you at the time of their promotion to the principalship? ____

Did you intentionally develop, support and/or endorse these former assistant principals for promotion to the principalship? Y N

Please rate your agreement with the following statements.

1. I believe it is possible to know when an assistant principal is ready* for the principalship.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**

2. I believe it is possible to assess readiness* for the principalship in assistant principals.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**

3. I believe it is possible to develop assistant principals to be ready for the principalship.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**

4. I know what characteristics reveal that an assistant principal is ready for the principalship.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**

5. I know how to develop an assistant principal to be ready for the principalship.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**

**ready* and *readiness* mean that the individual has what it takes to perform effectively

Appendix C: Participant Interview Protocol

Part 1: Focused Life History

Ice Breakers:

- Share personal background, interest in becoming a professor, principal stories
- Discuss study/research agenda as interest exists

The purpose of this interview is to become familiar with who you are as an educator and your journey becoming a principal developer (i.e., someone who has supported, developed and/or endorsed at least two former assistant principals for the principalship).

- Talk about the path you took to become an educator. What lead you to pursue administration?
- What role did supervising principals play in getting you ready for the principalship? What role did others play?
- You have a track record as a principal developer. Talk about how you came to be a school leader known for developing and/or supporting your assistant principals the principalship.
- How do you view yourself as a principal developer?

Part 2: Detailing the Experience

The purpose of this interview is to become familiar with it what it is to be a principal developer, using your experience(s) as a reference point. In your responses, assume that you are explaining things to someone who is NOT an educator and is NOT familiar with anything your saying by describing things in as much detail as possible.

- Talk about your first impressions / initial (professional) assessment of assistant principals that you have developed/supported for the principalship.
    - What stood out about them as having potential to become principals? What stood out as areas of needed growth?

- Describe how you went about growing these principals.
    - Job knowledge?
    - Job skills?
    - Personal knowledge (i.e., of self)?

    - Personal skills (i.e. reflection, etc.)
    - Leadership?
- How did their perceptions of themselves as school leaders compare to yours during the time you worked together?
    - What factors contributed to your perceptions becoming more alike or disparate?
- How did you know when they each were ready for the principalship?
    - How similar were the schools at which they became principals compared the school(s) where they worked for you? How much do you believe that factored in their ability to attain the principalship?
- How much do you talk to any of your former Aps who are now principals?
    - What feedback have they shared after becoming principals about how you got them ready for the job?
    - Have you changed anything in the way you develop/support Aps for the principalship based their feedback? Anything else you've discovered?

Part 3: Reflection on the Meaning

The purpose of this interview is to have you reflect on the meaning of your experience as a principal developer, particularly with regard to developing APs for the principalship.

- Given what you've said about your path to becoming a principal developer and experience as one, how do you understand what it is to be a principal developer?
- Given what you've said about your experience in developing/supporting APs for the principalship, what does readiness for the principalship involve for the principal developer? AP?
- How much does/can a principal developer matter to an AP becoming ready for the principalship?
- What matters most in identifying, developing and/or supporting an AP to become ready for the principalship?

Appendix D: Protégé Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Internet Research

Identification of Investigator and Purpose of Study
You are invited to participate in a research study, entitled "Exploring Readiness for the Principalship among Assistant Principals." The study is being conducted by Richard Gonzales, Doctoral Student, of The University of Texas at Austin, P.O., Box 7517 Austin, TX 78713,512-659-4366, rmgonzales@utexas.edu.

The purpose of this research study is to examine principals' perceptions about potential and readiness for the principalship among assistant principals. Your participation in the study will contribute to a better understanding of the knowledge, ability, and mindset necessary for navigating immediate organizational or job-specific challenges of the principalship. You are free to contact the investigator at the above address and phone number to discuss the study. You must be at least 18 years old to participate.

If you agree to participate:
• The survey will take approximately 5 minutes of your time.
• You will complete an activity about your opinion about a principal you worked for as an assistant principal.
• You will not be compensated.

Participation Risks and Benefits/Confidentiality of Data
There are no known risks of participation. There will be no costs for participating, nor will you benefit from participating. Your responses will not be shared with your former supervising principal or the district, nor will either be informed about whether you agree to participate. All identifying information will be stripped from the final dataset. Only the investigator will have access to the data during data collection.

Participation or Withdrawal
If you do not want to receive any more reminders, you may email us at rmgonzales@utexas.edu.

Contacts
If you have any questions about the study or need to update your email address contact the researcher, Richard Gonzales, at 512-659-4366 or send an email to rmgonzales@utexas.edu. This study has been reviewed by The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board and the study number is 2012-03-0016.

If you have questions about your rights or are dissatisfied at any time with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email atorsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

If you agree to participate, click on the following link http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/J7VRCGR

The password for the study is [PASSWORD].

Thank you.

Appendix E: Protégé Survey

Protégé Survey

The purpose of this study is to investigate principals' perceptions about potential and readiness for the principalship in assistant principals.

Your former supervising principal has been selected as a participant for this study, because *s/he* has been identified as a Principal Developer, or an educational administrator who has developed, supported and endorsed principals formally under his or her supervision for promotion to the principalship.

1. Please identify the name of your former supervising principal. _____

2. Do you agree that NAME meets the criteria as a Principal Developer? YES NO

3. OPTIONAL: Please indicate reasons for your response to item #1.

Appendix F: Table: Comparison of Participants' and Researcher's Responses

	Participants' Responses	My Responses

What counts as potential and readiness for the principalship?	• Competence
	  ○ Instructional leadership
	  ○ Organizational management
	• Dispositions
	  ○ Communication
	  ○ Self-regulation
	  ○ Emotional stability
		• Organizational leadership
		  ○ Orchestrate & facilitate the work
		  ○ Distribute leadership
		• Personal qualities
		  ○ Maturity
		  ○ Relational
		  ○ Passion
		  ○ Vision
		  ○ Self-motivated learner

How to assess & evaluate potential and readiness in assistant principals?	• Real-time products
	• Considerations
	  ○ Growth
	  ▪ Responsive to feedback
	  ▪ Adaptability
	  ○ Fit
	  ▪ Job
	  ▪ Stakeholders
		• Evidence that they:
		  ○ Move the work
		  ○ Build teams/ consensus; get buy in from people
		• Demonstrated ability to stand on their own
		• Title1 schools: strong social justice orientation

How to develop potential and readiness in assistant principals?	• Shared leadership • Strengths v Weaknesses	• Complementary partnership—we learned from each other through planning and debriefing

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